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THE ULTIMATE MUSIC GUIDE

ELVIS COSTELLO

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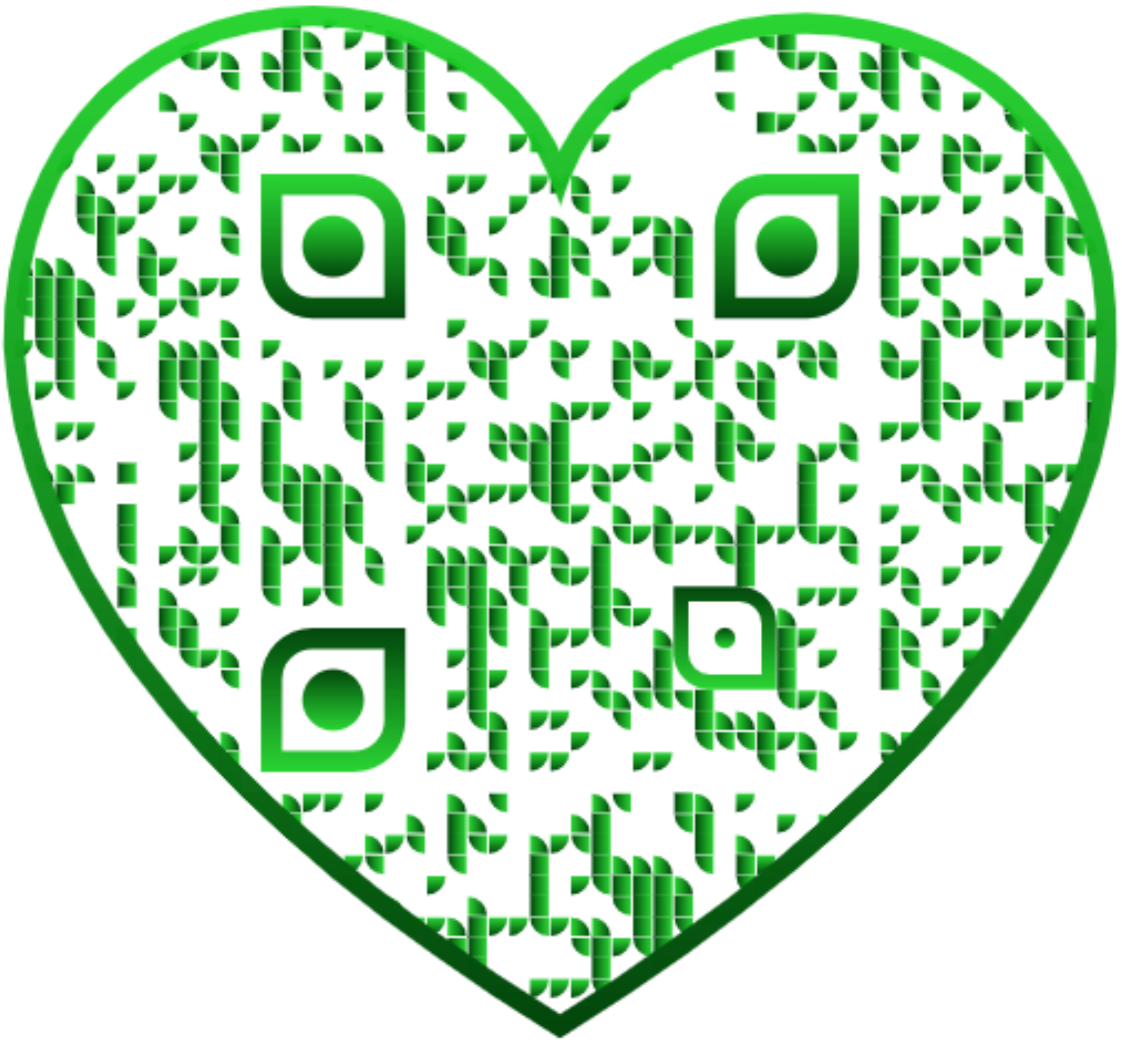

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Welcome!

IN JUNE 1977, Allan Jones of the *Melody Maker* took a familiar route to the offices of Stiff Records in West London. His appointment, that day, was with an irascible young singer-songwriter from Hounslow. In the course of a frequently startling interview, the man who had chosen to call himself Elvis Costello railed against pretty much everything he could think of, beginning a sequence of encounters that would be among the sharpest and most volatile to appear in the music press over the next few years. "I don't want any of that rock'n'roll rubbish," Costello told Jones, with a bile and urgency that matched the rhythms of his music. "I don't want to go cruising in Hollywood or hang out at all the star parties... Too much rock has cut itself off from people. It's become like ballet or something. Ballet is only for people who can afford to go see it. It's not for anybody else. You don't get ballet going on in your local pub.

"A lot of rock music's become exclusive and it's of no use to anyone. Least of all me. Music has to get to people. In the heart, in the head. I don't care where, as long as it fucking gets them."

Thirty-seven years later, it is easy to throw such words back in the face of Elvis Costello, enlightened polymath, trusted cohort of rock's A-list, from Paul McCartney on down, and, of course, composer of the odd ballet score. Nevertheless, while his modes of attack may change, Costello still has the ability to get to people, in the heart and in the head. Our latest *Ultimate Music Guide* is a strong illustration of that talent, and a celebration of one of the most smart, questing and quotable rock craftsmen that Britain has ever produced.

Within these pages, you'll find Costello going into battle with the British music press, as some of his finest historical skirmishes are reprinted in full. You'll also find incisive new reviews of every Costello album to date, with fresh perspectives on some of those less garlanded entries in the daunting EC canon.

At 60, Costello remains as adventurous as ever. Just as we were going to press, a copy of *Lost On The River: The New Basement Tapes* turned up in the *Uncut* office, with Costello playing a leading role in the creative development of a bunch of lost Dylan lyrics. It's a perfect fit for Costello, as a scholar of musical history and the art of songwriting, who can draw on an encyclopaedic knowledge of music and turn it to his own, richly characterful ends.

"There are still people who want everything I've done documented and explained," he complained to Allan Jones in 1989. "Like I say, it's all in the past... none of it means a damn. You can't go digging around forever in the past. It's history. Let it go. It's what I'm doing now that counts. That's what I want people to realise."

We do. But first, it's hard to begrudge us an unprecedentedly thorough dig through one of rock's most auspicious careers. Our aim, be assured, is true...

Elvis Costello in 2013

CONTENTS

6 "There's no place for glamour or romance"
CLASSIC INTERVIEW 1977: Introducing Hounslow's ferocious ball of energy, angry at most things...

10 MY AIM IS TRUE
ALBUM REVIEW From the lipstick factory, a "complete loser"'s quality debut

12 "Get on the case. I want Elvis sprung!"
CLASSIC INTERVIEW A deranged Stiff caper ends with Costello arrested for guerrilla busking

18 THIS YEAR'S MODEL
ALBUM REVIEW The Attractions assist on Elvis' classic second LP

20 "I don't need you to tell me I'm good"
CLASSIC INTERVIEW Back from the States and bigger than ever, Costello and his band are in terrifying shape

24 ARMED FORCES
ALBUM REVIEW A conflict-themed, barbed pop masterpiece

26 GET HAPPY!!
ALBUM REVIEW Costello's frantic tribute to the golden sounds of Motown and Stax

28 TRUST
ALBUM REVIEW Close to collapse, Elvis leads The Attractions on an erratic, diverse adventure

30 ALMOST BLUE
ALBUM REVIEW "WARNING: This album contains country & western music..."

32 IMPERIAL BEDROOM
ALBUM REVIEW A baroque and Beatlesy album, but still uncompromisingly visceral

34 "I'm not a man of the people"
CLASSIC INTERVIEW After a four-year silence, Elvis returns to do battle with the music press

44 PUNCH THE CLOCK
ALBUM REVIEW A horn-assisted, technical knockout of '80s pop

46 GOODBYE CRUEL WORLD
ALBUM REVIEW Costello's take on modern pop goes somewhat awry

48 "I like being hysterical sometimes"
CLASSIC INTERVIEW Casting a gimlet eye over the competition, Elvis introduces his Coward Brothers duo

54 KING OF AMERICA
ALBUM REVIEW Costello's 10th album – and perhaps his crowning glory

56 "Elvis Costello became a character..."
CLASSIC INTERVIEW Keen to shake off old clichés, the King Of America attempts to begin anew

62 BLOOD & CHOCOLATE
ALBUM REVIEW The Attractions return with a nasty, explosive set

64 SPIKE
ALBUM REVIEW Folk? Funk? Americana? Paul McCartney co-writes? Costello stretches out...

66 "Still getting up someone's fuckin' nose"
CLASSIC INTERVIEW Our man talks Thatcher, the early '80s and *Spike* over a drink or 20 in Dublin

76 MIGHTY LIKE A ROSE
ALBUM REVIEW A bold new phase, or a wrong move?

78 THE JULIET LETTERS
ALBUM REVIEW Costello tangles with The Brodsky Quartet

80 "It's dangerous to become complacent..."
CLASSIC INTERVIEW EC discusses Nirvana, Gorbachev and his back-to-basics new album

84 BRUTAL YOUTH
ALBUM REVIEW The old gang reform for this bold, raging return

86 KOJAK VARIETY
ALBUM REVIEW A crate-digging covers set, straight from Barbados

88 "Arty-farty? That phrase should be forcibly removed"
CLASSIC INTERVIEW It's 1995, and Elvis holds court on football, Prince Charles and Dylan

94 ALL THIS USELESS BEAUTY
ALBUM REVIEW The muted last stand of The Attractions

96 PAINTED FROM MEMORY
ALBUM REVIEW The look of Bert: Elvis teams up with the legendary Bacharach

98 WHEN I WAS CRUEL
ALBUM REVIEW Costello's "first loud album" for years – also satisfyingly weird

ESTATE OF KEITH MORRIS/REDFERNS

Miracle man: Elvis in his '77 prime – an outtake from the *My Aim Is True* cover shoot

FISH IS BRAIN FOOD!

On the brink of getting happier: Elvis Costello & The Attractions on tour in Chicago, 1979

100 NORTH ALBUM REVIEW Ballads celebrating EC's new love

102 THE DELIVERY MAN/IL SOGNO ALBUM REVIEW A country-soul extravaganza, plus a ballet score

104 THE RIVER IN REVERSE ALBUM REVIEW Paying tribute to New Orleans with Allen Toussaint

106 MOMOFUKU ALBUM REVIEW Instant tunes! A speedy and stealthy new record

108 SECRET, PROFANE & SUGARCANE ALBUM REVIEW Costello's schizophrenic 25th – containing country tracks and cuts from a Danish opera

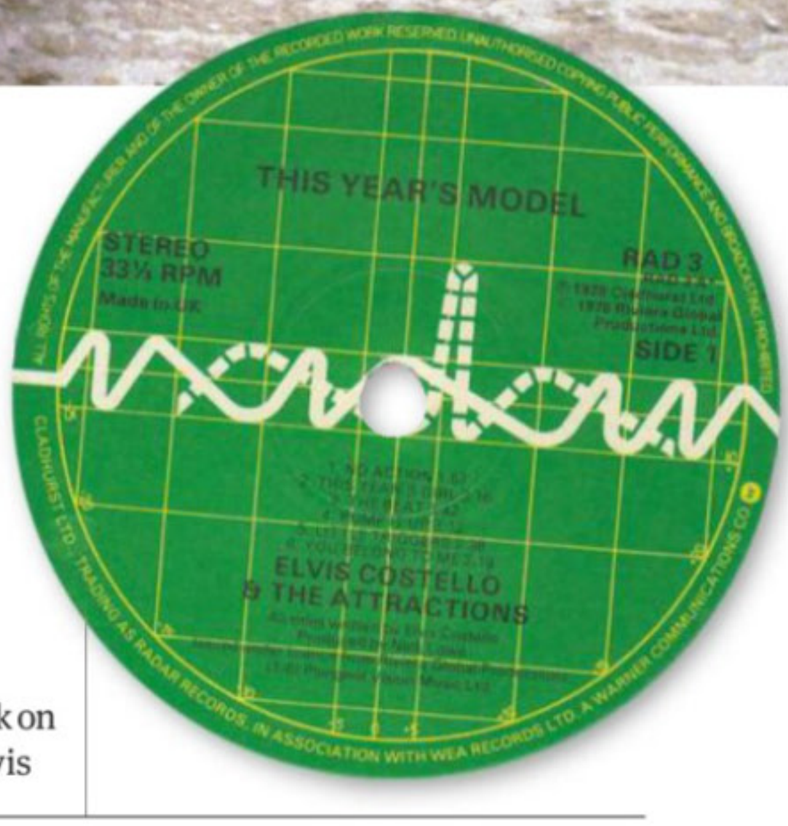
110 NATIONAL RANSOM ALBUM REVIEW Telling stories... Elvis tackles WWI ghosts and the death of Jean Charles de Menezes

112 WISE UP GHOST ALBUM REVIEW The Roots help cook up this funky surprise set

114 COMPILATIONS AND LIVE ALBUMS ALBUM REVIEW Navigating a path through the rest of Costello's bewildering catalogue

118 MISCELLANY UK singles discography, rarities and the singer's guest appearances

122 STOP ME... Terry Staunton looks back on his charged encounters with Elvis



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"There's no place for glamour or romance at the moment"

Summer 1977. **ALLAN JONES** is introduced to Captain Verbals; a ferociously intolerant ball of energy from the badlands of Hounslow. "I'm bored with people who romanticise the fucking street," says Elvis Costello, angry about most things, not least people's attempts to tag him the British Springsteen. "I don't want any of that rock'n'roll rubbish..."

"Let's talk about the future now, we'll put the past away"
– Elvis Costello, "Less Than Zero"

ELVIS COSTELLO WAS emphatic: he would volunteer no information about his past. "I don't," he said, adjusting his shades impatiently, "really think that the past – my past – is all that interesting. I don't see any point in talking about the past. I don't want to get into that. I mean, I haven't just learned the guitar in the last 10 minutes, but I'm not going to get talking about what I've done in the past.

"Nobody showed any interest in me then. If you weren't there, you missed it and that's it. It's gone. The people who were there then either appreciated it or they didn't. The past would only be relevant to them. As far as I'm concerned, it's pointless talking about the past. Fuck it. I'd just rather talk about the future, you know."

There. I told you he was emphatic, didn't I?

Elvis Costello and I are bickering this sun-drenched Tuesday afternoon in an office above Stiff Records' London HQ because I had, accidentally, seen and been enthralled by his performance a week earlier at the Nashville Rooms.

Friday, May 27, it was: I'd tubed over to West Kensington to catch The Rumour that night. The presence, at the bar of the Nashville Rooms, of Stiff executive Jake Riviera, accompanied by an assorted crew of Stiff hirelings and lackeys, seemed, initially, to be of no profound consequence.

There exist, after all, several connections between Stiff, Graham Parker And The Rumour; and, anyway, Jake ain't the kind of cat who'd miss out on a decent lig should one appear on the horizon as it had that evening.

Jake's appearance, however, was not on this occasion relegated to the pursuit of hedonistic adventures. He announced casually that one Elvis Costello, a recent Stiff protégé, was to make a previously unscheduled debut as supporting attraction for the Rumour. This information I received with considerable interest. Elvis Costello, though not yet a name on the lips of the nation, had released two singles (" Less Than Zero" and, more recently, "Alison") of rare distinction. To see this enigmatic charmer in action was, unquestionably, a proposition not to be overlooked. Well, I dragged myself away from the bar as a brief whisper of applause signalled El's appearance. And there he stood, alone on the stage: black cropped hair swept back, the inevitable shades shielding his eyes, slickly cut Harry Fenton jacket, blue jeans and Fender guitar. His attitude and performance were both characterised by an aggressive conviction and, as the applause between songs intensified, a clear and thrilling confidence.

Elvis Costello, let me tell you, bowled me out of my breeches that night. Why, I even swore that if a platter containing such Costello meisterwerks as "(The Angels Wanna Wear) My Red Shoes", "Mystery Dance", "I'm Not Angry" and "Waiting For The End Of The World" was not in the vicinity of my Dansette turntable by the end of the month, I'd be around to Stiff looking for the head of Jake Rivieria.

The fact that Jake's head remains unsevered would suggest that the platter for which I yearned has been delivered: and so it has, to my immense delight. Trouble is that Stiff, after falling out with Island, are without a distribution organisation. El's album has been temporarily suspended – it was originally due for release this very week, actually. Fear not, however. It will be with you soon: in the meantime, I thought I'd bring you a dispatch from the Elvis Costello front...

HERE WE GO: Elvis Costello is 22. He's been writing songs for eight years. Since he first negotiated three juvenile chords on a battered guitar, in fact. He reluctantly admits to listening to the likes of The Beatles, Cliff Bennett and Georgie Fame as an adolescent: "Standard stuff. Whatever was on the radio."

Elvis, though he elsewhere proves to be refreshingly honest and forthright in the opinions he expresses, remains defiantly vague about the songs he was composing during this early period of his career: "I've written hundreds of songs," he says. "I write at least a song a week. That doesn't necessarily mean I keep them all.

"They're not all classics. I mean, I've

REX/BARRY SCHULTZ/SUNSHINE

Double Dutch: Costello in Holland, 1977

discarded songs I wrote last month because I thought they were inept or didn't match up to the best of what I've written. I wouldn't talk about them, let alone songs I wrote eight years ago."

I had been interested in these earlier songs, I explain, simply because I wanted to form some idea of the pattern and evolution of his writing. The songs collected on his forthcoming album, *My Aim Is True*, for instance, are marked by a precocious maturity. Costello may deal principally with themes familiar in rock – the majority, in fact, are concerned with fiercely detailed accounts of romantic encounters and failures – but he introduces a ruthless honesty to these themes and invests his observations and scenarios with perceptive insights and astonishingly vivid images.

The insecurities and infidelities of relationships, adolescent attempts to attain a personal identity and independence, are examined with sensitive compassion and wit; often acerbically, but equally as often, as on the classic "Alison", with an exquisite tenderness.

Always, Costello retains his originality as a lyricist: he avoids conclusively the obvious and tiresome teendream preoccupations of comparative writers like Nils Lofgren (the midget Yank's recent work, at least), Elliott Murphy and Springsteen. No, Elvis' songs possess the cutting clarity of the best of Graham Parker and Van Morrison: indeed, like this latter pair, Costello's music refers constantly to the classic pop/rock standards of the last decade, each song being sharply defined and full of irresistible hooks and delightful instrumental phrasing (for the verve and incisiveness of the album's sound, some considerable credit must be attributed to Nick Lowe, Elvis' producer).

"This influence stuff," says Costello, when several of the aforementioned musicians are mentioned, "is irritating, 'cos people are always trying to pin you down to sounding like somebody else. I appreciate the comparison you drew with Graham Parker. I suppose that it's because he's currently maybe the only person that's doing anything like me.

"If there's a general musical area that he's working in, then I accept that I'm working in a similar area and the comparison is validly drawn. And I'd rather be compared to Graham Parker than Tom Jones. If someone came along and said that I sounded like John Denver then I'd fucking worry. It's better to be compared to somebody good; but it still doesn't mean that I sit at home trying to think of ways to rewrite songs from *Heat Treatment*. "Anyway, if I'd had a record out before Graham Parker, it would all be reversed... 'cos, you know, the people who're saying that I sound like Graham Parker are the same people who said that Graham Parker sounded like Bruce Springsteen, who are the same people who said that Bruce Springsteen sounded like Van Morrison, who are the same people who said that Van Morrison sounded the same as Bobby Bland or whoever. You know, the people who NEVER listen to the fucking music."

The prospect of being compared to Springsteen, whose panavision scenarios – replete with so much obvious romantic, rock-mythology imagery of a kind quite antithetical to Costello's writing – fills Elvis with anguish and dread.

"Springsteen is always romanticising the fucking street," he complains, with no little justification. "I'm bored with people who romanticise the fucking street. The street isn't fucking attractive. I mean, I don't pretend to live in the heart of one of the worst areas of the world, right. I live near Hounslow. It's a very boring area. It's a terrible place. Awful. Nowhere. Nothing happens. There's nothing exciting or glamorous or romantic about it.

"There's nothing glamorous or romantic about the world at the moment. There is no place for glamour or romance. Romance, in the old pop song sense, has gone right out of the fucking window for the moment. Nobody's got the time or the money. It's gone beyond all that. But, please remember, I don't sit around wondering how people see the world, or how they feel about things. I don't attempt to express their feelings. I only write about the way I feel. I mean, I'm not arbitrator of public taste or opinion. I don't have a following of people who are waiting for my next word. I hope I never have that kind of following. People should be waiting for their own next word. Not mine."

"I WANT TO BE OUT GIGGING, EARNING MONEY... I'M NOT ASKIN' ANYBODY FOR THEIR FUCKING CHARITY!"

ELVIS APPROACHED STIFF Records last August: he arrived at their office in West London with a tape of his songs and the response of Jake Riviera and Dave Robinson (also manager of Graham Parker) was immediate and enthusiastic.

They signed him to the label, in fact.

"There was no phenomenal advance," he laughs. "They've bought me an amp and a tape recorder. I'm glad that they're not subsidising me to any greater extent. I don't want to be put on a retainer and spend my time ligging around record company offices like a lot of other musicians. I don't want any charity. I want to be out gigging, earning money. I don't want anything for nothing. I'm not askin' anybody for their fucking charity. I went to a lot of record companies before I came to Stiff. Major record companies. And I never asked them for charity. I didn't go in with any servile attitude. I didn't go in and say, 'Look, I've got these songs and, well, with a bit of patching up and a good producer I might make a good record.' I went in and said, 'I've got some great fucking songs, record them and release them.' Stiff were the only ones that showed that kind of faith in me.

"They let me do it. I'm still working, right? I'll only give up the job when I start working with a band."

Elvis mentions, mischievously, that none of the musicians that contributed their services to his album are credited on the sleeve (Nick Lowe gets a production credit on the label, though). It transpires that this was El's idea of a caustic comment upon the contemporary state of the music business – an industry for which Elvis has very little admiration or respect.

He had a caption, in fact, prepared for the sleeve of his album, which would have read: "No thanks to anybody." Unfortunately, The Damned got there first when they had printed on the sleeve of their album: "Thanks to no-one." El didn't want anyone to think he'd copped the idea, so it was abandoned.

"The people who were directly involved with the album know who they are," El explains, "and they're not the kind of people who'd be worried about credits and namechecks. Equally, the people who were instrumental in stopping me from recording before know who they were, and I wanted to remind them that I hadn't forgotten them.

"Like, I went around for nearly a year with demo tapes before I came to Stiff, and it was always the same response. 'We can't hear the words.' 'It isn't commercial enough.' 'There aren't any singles.' Idiots. Those tapes were just voice and guitar demos. I didn't have enough money to do anything with a band. It was just a lack of imagination on the part of those people at the record companies. I felt as if I was bashing my head against a brick wall, those people just weren't prepared to listen to the songs.

"It's a terrible position to be in. You start thinking you're mad. You listen to the radio and you watch the TV and you hear a lot of fucking rubbish. You very rarely turn on the radio or TV and hear anything exciting, right? And, all the

EC at the Nashville Rooms, London, August 14, 1977

GUS STEWART/REDFERNS

time, you know that you're capable of producing something infinitely better.

"But I never lost faith. I'm convinced in my own talent, yeah. Like I said, I wasn't going up to these people meekly and saying, 'Look, with your help and a bit of polishing up, and with all your expertise and knowledge of the world of music we might have a moderate success on our hands.' I was going in thinking, 'You're a bunch of fucking idiots who don't know what you're doing. I'm bringing you a lot of good songs, why don't you go ahead and fucking well record them?' They didn't seem to understand that kind of approach.

"No, it didn't make me bitter. I was already bitter. I knew what it would be like. I have no illusions at all about the music business. It was no sudden shock to be confronted by these idiots. I didn't ever think that I was going to walk into a record company to meet all these fat guys smoking big cigars who'd say something like, 'Stick with me, son. I'll make you a STAR.'

"I'm not starry-eyed in the slightest. You can tell what all these people are like instinctively. You just have to look at them to tell that they're fucking idiots. But, I don't want to come off sounding like I'm obsessed with the business.

"I couldn't give a shit about the music business. They just don't know anything. That's all you've got to remember. They're irrelevant. I don't give any thought to any of those people. They're not worth my time."

Elvis, who by this time seems to be metamorphising before my very eyes into the superhuman guise of Captain Verbals, is telling me about his album. It was recorded, he says, on his days off from work (he is a computer analyst in Acton), over a very brief period.

He was fortunate, he readily admits, that Nick Lowe was so sympathetic a producer: their respective ideas were entirely compatible and there were few arguments about the sound and instrumentation employed. All the songs were written within weeks of the first session; "Less Than Zero", his first single, was written three days before it was recorded, for instance.

Elvis just says he felt inspired and excited. The hits just kept on coming (*My Aim Is True*, incidentally, is the first album I've heard for ages that sounds as if it is essentially a collection of Top 10 singles), as it were.

"I just love the sound of the album," Elvis enthuses. "'Cos I love things that sound great on the radio. 'Less Than Zero', I thought sounded great on the radio. The record isn't for people with fucking great hi-fis. I'm not interested in those people, or that kind of mentality. I don't want my records to be used to demonstrate fucking stereos in Lasky's. I just want people to listen to the fucking music.

"I don't want to be successful so that I can get a lot of money and retire to a house in the fucking country. I don't want any of that rock'n'roll rubbish. I don't want to go cruising in Hollywood or hang out at all the star parties. I'm not interested in any of that. It's the arse end of rock'n'roll. I'm just interested in playing.

"I want to put a band together as soon as possible and get out on the fucking road. We're auditioning people this week. We're looking for young people. People that want to get out and play. Putting a band together is the most important thing at the moment.

"I think it might be difficult getting the right kind of people and I can imagine us wading through a right bunch of idiots. The group sound I want will be a lot sparser than the album sound. I just want bass, drum, guitar – my guitar – and for keyboards we'll probably go for a Vox or Farfisa sound.

"I want to get away from the conventional group sound. I'd say I want a kind of pop group lineup, but people might take that as something lightweight or trivial. But it will be a pop lineup in the sense that it won't be a rock band.

"I hate hard-rock bands. I hate anything with fucking extended solos or bands that are concerned with any kind of instrumental virtuosity. I can listen to maybe 15 seconds of someone like The Crusaders, say, before I get very bored. I know how good they are because everybody keeps telling me how fucking marvellous they are. But I get bored.

"There are going to be no fucking soloists in my band. The songs are the most important thing. I want the songs to mean something to people. I don't mean by that that I want them to be significant. It's just that too much rock has cut itself off from people. It's become like ballet or something. Ballet is only for people who can afford to go and see it. It's not for anybody else. You don't get ballet going on in your local pub.

"There's a lot of rock music that's become exclusive and it's of no use to anyone. Least of all me. Music has to get to people. In the heart, in the head. I don't care where, as long as it fucking gets them. So much music gets thrown away. It's such a fucking waste.

"That's why I like and write short songs. It's a discipline. There's no disguise. You can't cover up songs like that by dragging in banks of fucking synthesisers and choirs of angels. They have to stand up on their own. With none of that nonsense. Songs are just so fucking effective. People seem to have forgotten that.

"Like, people used to live their lives by songs. They were like calendars or diaries. And they were pop songs. Not elaborate fucking pieces of music. You wouldn't say, like, 'Yeah, that's the time I went out with Janet, we went to see the LSO playing Mozart.' You'd remember you went out with Janet because they were playing 'Summer In The City' on the radio."

You will have gathered by now that Elvis is committed to success: he's not, however, sure when that success will be achieved.

"There are lot of people," he says, "who should be successful. If ability had anything to do with success then there would be a whole lot of obscure people who'd be famous and there would be a whole lot of famous people who'd be lingering in obscurity."

Was there anyone, I wondered, that he would like to see becoming famous?

"Yeah," he replied. "Me."

MY AIM IS TRUE

Straight out of the lipstick factory, a "complete loser" comes good.

BY PETER WATTS

RELEASED JULY 22, 1977

WHEN *MY AIM Is True* landed on the desk of American critic Greil Marcus, he "thought it was a hoax". In the rock world of 1977, nobody looked or sounded like the man on the cover, with bully-me glasses, gammy-legged stance, whiney voice and loud jacket. "I didn't believe anyone as geeky, who looked as if he were about to trip over his own feet, would have the nerve to appear in public under his own name," Marcus said when considering the 2001 reissue of *My Aim Is True*.

In a way, he was right. Costello was the creation of Declan MacManus, born in London in 1954. With a bandleader dad and a mum who ran a record store, MacManus was always going to take an interest in music, and by 1970 he was playing folk clubs before forming a pub rock band, Flip City. In 1975, MacManus had to take a desk job to support his wife and son, and rather than give up on a career in music, this seemed to ignite the single-mindedness that would illuminate his career.

"In 1976, I was operating an IBM 360 computer in a lipstick factory," he recalled. "My duties included printing out invoices for the moustache waxes of the occasional duchess who visited the company's West End salon." Costello commuted to Acton from Hounslow and the songs he wrote on the way were drenched in a potent solution of spiky bitterness, like Jimmy Porter with a six-string.

Renamed DP Costello – the surname, occasionally used by his father, came from a paternal great-grandmother – he tried his hand as a solo artist, touting demos to labels and getting played on radio. He visited record companies, performing auditions in front of bored executives, something that must have tortured a man of Costello's self-belief.

Redemption came in the shape of Nick Lowe, producer at Stiff Records. Lowe met Costello in 1972 in Liverpool when Lowe was playing in Brinsley Schwarz. In 1976, fortune struck again when Lowe bumped into Costello at Royal Oak station. Costello had just delivered his tape to the Stiff office. Stiff already knew of DP Costello, and Lowe's enthusiasm made it straightforward – £150, "a new cassette tape recorder and a Vox battery-powered practice amp".

Stiff had their man and their man had his songs, but nobody seemed quite sure what to do next. Should he write songs for Dave Edmunds' new band, Rockpile? Should he record a split LP with Wreckless Eric? Enthused by neither option, Costello was sent into a tiny studio in Holloway to knock up a single. Now cannily rechristened Elvis by manager Jake Riviera, he was backed by Clover, a group of Americans who had accidently become Stiff's house band and would later become Huey Lewis And The News (Lewis was absent from the Costello sessions). With Lowe swathed in cigarette smoke behind the board, *My Aim Is True* came together in six four-hour sessions.

Costello said he was motivated by "revenge and guilt", and *My Aim Is True* is all about sexual frustration, restrained violence and impotent fury. Opening track "Welcome To The Working Week" raises the flag, slamming a woman who can't acknowledge the narrowness of her existence. "*Sometimes I wonder if we're livin' in the same land*," Costello spits. "*If they knew how I felt they'd bury me alive*." Costello would batter home the point in interview: "There's nothing glamorous or romantic about the world at the moment."

Musically, *My Aim Is True* is suburban R'n'B, filtered through Clover's professionalism and Stiff's haphazard ethic. It's the latter that gives the album its punkish urgency – "I didn't even know if the record was going to come out, Stiff only existed from week to week," Costello said. Costello's domestic responsibility meant he was

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"The collection contains enough potential hit singles to stock a bloody jukebox, believe me. You can dance to it, swoon to it, sing along with it, laugh and cry with it, smooch and romance to it."
ALLAN JONES, MELODY MAKER, JULY 23, 1977

"Costello must have taken a lot of emotional knocks to come up with such a powerful album, to the extent that one is reticent to guess what length he may have to go to enact a second instalment. An album of often intense brilliance."
ROY CARR, NME, JULY 23, 1977

removed from the punk movement and few punks would have recorded anything like the countrified "Miracle Man" or the Platters-like "No Dancing", the second and third songs on the album, let alone the Edward Lear rockabilly "Mystery Dance" of Side Two. Dominating the music is the man, or a shadow of one. Throughout *My Aim Is True*, Costello has rings run round him by superior women, in one case listening at the door while a former girlfriend entertains another lover. "Those are the only songs in a rock idiom where a man is admitting absolute defeat," he said. "I'm talking about being a complete loser."

Also recurring is the Catholic imagery – it's there in "Miracle Man" and "I'm Not Angry", and also fourth track "Blame It On Cain", a sleazy rocker that is followed by the subtle, stalkerish menace of "Alison", another ditty addressed to an ex. "Alison" provides a change of pace, which demonstrates the depth of Costello's talent and also allows guitarist John McFee a moment to shine. The song would soon be covered by Linda Ronstadt, while Costello would confess he based the chorus on "Ghetto Child" by The Detroit Spinners. Costello wrote most of *My Aim Is True* at work or on the tube, but "Alison" was written at home at night. Scared of waking his family, Costello sang so quietly he "didn't really know what it sounded like until I got into the studio".

"Sneaky Feelings" ends Side One on an optimistic note, before the Byrds-like "(The Angels Want To Wear My) Red Shoes" offers the classic couplet "*I said, I'm so happy I could die/ She said 'drop dead' then left with another guy*". It's great fun, but just when it seems Costello is all about self-obsessed sneering, "Less Than Zero" provides a vicious reggae-touched fantasy slapdown of British fascist Oswald Mosley. It's the first of Costello's political songs, and although he would become subtler and angrier, he already shows a knack for getting to the point without banging the listener over the head. Costello would rewrite the song for America, switching Oswalds from Mosley to Lee Harvey.

Costello's fondness for Randy Newman comes out on the piano roll whimsy of "Pay It Back", before the rocky "I'm Not Angry" offers a summary of themes so far, from the opening line – "*You're upstairs with the boyfriend while I'm left here to listen*" – through the Catholic imagery, the autobiographical references and the ambiguous sense of poisonous capitulation to a former squeeze. The album ends with Dylanesque ramble "Waiting For The End Of The World", although the American edition included Clash-influenced pop-dub single "Watching The Detectives". Strong reviews pushed *My Aim Is True* into the charts, allowing Costello to give up his job and recruit a permanent backing band. Not bad for a loser. The geek had landed.

TRACKMARKS MY AIM IS TRUE

1. Welcome To The Working Week ★★★★
2. Miracle Man ★★★
3. No Dancing ★★★★
4. Blame It On Cain ★★★
5. Alison ★★★★★
6. Sneaky Feelings ★★★
7. (The Angels Wanna Wear My) Red Shoes ★★★★★
8. Less Than Zero ★★★★★
9. Mystery Dance ★★★
10. Pay It Back ★★
11. I'm Not Angry ★★★★
12. Waiting For The End Of The World ★★★★

Label: Stiff
Produced by: Nick Lowe
Recorded at: Pathway Studios, Holloway
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitar, piano, percussion), Nick Lowe (backing vocals, piano, percussion, bass), John McFee (guitar, pedal steel, backing vocals), Sean Hopper (piano, organ, backing vocals), Stan Shaw (organ), Johnny Ciambotti (bass, backing vocals), Mickey Shine (drums)
Highest chart position: UK 14; US 32

TAKEN FROM
MELODY MAKER
6/8/1977

The Attractions: (l-r) Steve Nieve, Bruce Thomas, Elvis Costello and Pete Thomas, near Stiff HQ, London 1977

"Get on the I want sprung

A somewhat eventful day in the life of Stiff Records. Label boss Jake Riviera invites ALLAN JONES into his nerve centre, and leads him on a frankly deranged caper that ends up with Elvis Costello being arrested for guerrilla busking outside a CBS sales conference. Will he be released in time for the Attractions' London debut? And is that Dr Feelgood at the bar?

JAKE RIVIERA REMINDS me of a hip Hitler. Jake, of course, hasn't Adolf's toothbrush stubble moustache lingering beneath his nose like a malevolent caterpillar; neither does he have that lank comma of hair slicked rakishly over one eye like a Brylcreemed bat's wing. Nor is it likely that he shares any of the late dictator's more unpleasant psychopathic tendencies. And it would be difficult to imagine the Führer prancing about Nuremberg in winklepicker cowboy shoes, Levi's and a cowboy shirt, singing the praises of the likes of Rat Scabies or Captain Sensible or Nick Lowe.

But there is about Jake that sense of manic urgency, the controlled hysteria and ruthless insistence on achievement that one remembers from those films salvaged from the ruined archives of the Third Reich.

It's 10.30 on an overcast Tuesday morning and Jake is cartwheeling furiously about Stiff Records' command centre in West London. The Damned have been successfully dispatched to Southampton to record a television show with Mike Mansfield. He's now dealing with the first wave of incoming telephone calls and simultaneously arranging a multitude of freewheeling deals, negotiating forthcoming Stiff projects and contracts and organising the advertising campaign for Elvis Costello.

Meanwhile, an American journalist is attempting to interview him on the subject of Stiff's plans. "Is Elvis Costello going to be Stiff's biggest star?" she asks seriously.

Jake can't resist the temptation to scream with laughter. "I don't fucking know. I just put out the records." His attention is diverted (fortunately, perhaps) by another telephone call. The American lady consoles herself by taking a series of candid photographs: she seems, for some unlikely reason, infatuated with his feet and snaps a series of shots of his ankles.

Jake stares at her in mild disbelief and takes another call. He verbals at a speed so relentless that it leaves friction burns on the brain.

"Yeah, Stiff Records. Bonjour. That's French for bonjour. Ah, it's you. Right. I want full-page ads on Elvis. Spot colour. Somewhere near the front of the papers. Got it? No excuses. I don't want to find them stuck right up the back.

REX/STEVE WOOD

case. Elvis !”

Good. Get on the case, then. Let's start shaking. Groovy."

He slams down the telephone. "Cynthia. A letter. Quick. Shake it, Cynthia. Time is money and we're late. With an overdraft."

The American journalist surrenders in the face of this early-morning frenzy. She has to leave now, but could Jake possibly put her name down on the guestlist for Elvis Costello's London debut that evening at Dingwalls?

Jake looks at her. He notes that she is obviously of Oriental extraction. "Sure," he replies. "What was the name again? Pearl Harbour? Cynthia, put Pearl's name on the list. Let's get shaking."

THE HISTORY OF Stiff Record since its inception last August has been a saga of intrepid adventure and individual enterprise. Succinctly: Stiff was conceived by Jake Riviera as a challenge to the superiority of the major record companies.

The idea of Stiff as a renegade independent company, operating almost as a kind of guerrilla force within the music business, first suggested itself when he was skating across the wastelands of North America as tour manager for Dr Feelgood.

"We were travelling through Louisiana," he remembers, "in and out of all these one-eyed towns, and even there you could find all these thrift shops stocked with all these singles on obscure labels. There's always been that kind of tradition in America. There have been some attempts to do it here, but none of them really worked. I just thought it would be a real gas to start a label.

"We were just sitting in this station wagon. And there isn't really a lot to occupy your mind after you've seen the first mile of swamps and your first three alligators. By the time we finished the tour, I'd thought of the name, designed the logo. Everything."

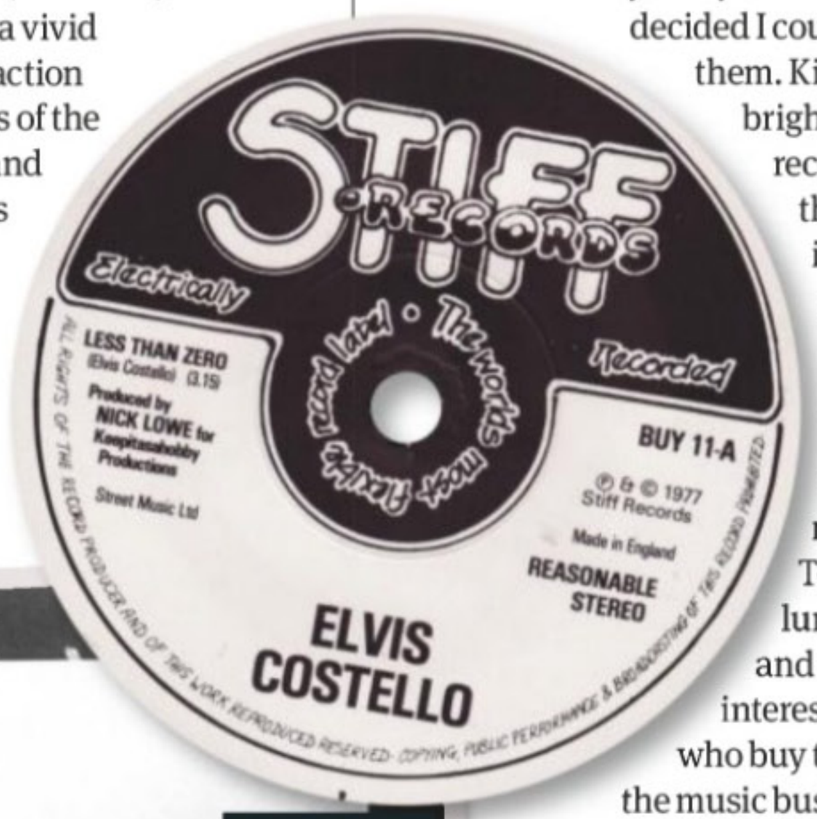
Jake had previously managed the delightfully eccentric Chilli Willi – who had been signed to Mooncrest, a subsidiary of Charisma – and had endured what he believed to be a bureaucratic mentality. "I presented them with all kinds of wild schemes," he recalls, "but no-one had the imagination to suss what we could do. The whole thing was a lot more off-the-wall with the Willis, though. I mean, if you're a band with a name like Chilli Willi And The Red Hot Peppers and you release an album called *Bongos Over Balham*, it's going to strike a few people as eccentric. It's not exactly *Frampton Comes Alive!*, is it?

"But, at the same time, there were people we could have got that record to, people that would've been interested and enjoyed it. We didn't have a chance, though, because no-one would take the kind of risk involved."

The Chillis were one of the last bands to represent the ill-fated pub rock movement that blossomed in London between 1973 and 1975. To promote that band, and their contemporaries Dr Feelgood and Kokomo, Jake devised the Naughty Rhythms Tour.

The idea was ingeniously simple. The three bands would form a package tour, sharing expenses and alternating as headliners. Ticket prices would be low. The tour broke the Feelgoods as a commercial property, but precipitated the split of the Chillis (much to Jake's regret). It had been, however, a courageous manoeuvre; a vivid expression of the dissatisfaction with the existing principles of the rockbiz empires that Jake and his immediate accomplices were determined to undermine.

I recall interviewing Jake at that time. I was impressed by his impatience with the lumbering mechanics of



EC with (front right) Nick Lowe at Eden Studios, London, 1977

"IT NO LONGER HAS TO TAKE THREE ALBUMS, TWO YEARS AND 200 GIGS A YEAR TO BREAK A BAND"
JAKE RIVIERA

the music industry. He criticised eloquently the superstar elite and their lack of concern for young bands (Pete Townsend he congratulated for the studio time he offered at The Who's Ramport Studio, however), thus anticipating by three years the belligerence of the new wave. He was determined to divorce himself, and by implication, those bands with whom he would be subsequently involved, from what he then described as "the Punch and Judy syndrome of groups who spend most of what they earn on platform boots and leather coats, trying to maintain the illusion of being stars. They don't understand that the kids will eventually see through all that."

Three years later, with Stiff now a thriving commercial venture (its success with singles by Nick Lowe, The Damned and their album was catalogued in detail in the July 9 edition of *MM*), Jake's opinions on the Industry Of Human Happiness have hardly mellowed.

"I spent years shouting at people over desks in record company offices. They turned down virtually every idea I offered them. I decided I could do it without them. Kids are hipper and brighter than most record companies think. Stiff is interested in reaching those kids, right. I'm not interested in handing out stacks of free records and T-shirts and free lunches to journalists and dealers. I'm interested in the kids who buy the records, not the music business. And I want to offer those kids a good deal.

"Like, we've had ONE reception since we started Stiff, when we had champers and strawberries at the end of the T.Rex tour. That was EMI's idea. We agreed 'cos we thought The Damned might enjoy it."

Jake is very much the public face of Stiff, though it should not be implied that the company is a solo operation: his partner is Dave Robinson, with whom he has also formed Advancedale Management. This handles the careers of Graham Parker And The Rumour, Elvis Costello, Clover, Nick Lowe and The Damned.

Still, it is Jake's personal philosophy and maverick character that the label reflects. The marketing and promotional tactics and the often wacky schemes and advertising ploys synonymous with the label are invariably the product of Jake's fertile imagination. The catalogue signatures of Stiff's releases are BUY and SEEZ, for singles and albums respectively; and the labels bear such delightful qualifications as "Proper Stereo" (Plummet Airlines' "Silver Shirt"), "Would-Have-Been Stereo" (Costello's "Welcome To The Working Week"), "Reasonable Stereo" (the same artist's "Less Than Zero").

"It's just a way to remind people in the industry that music is fun," he says, explaining these idiosyncrasies – for example, Stiff gave away singles to celebrate the first anniversary of The Damned, and there is a current "Help Us Hype Elvis" free album offer. "I can't understand why people are so suspicious of things like that. The industry thinks we're a joke, that we're not interested in selling records. Of course we want to sell records! It's just that we're trying to offer some bonus to the people who buy them.

"People are beginning to appreciate what we're doing and there have been some direct lifts of Stiff's marketing approach. Limited edition 12-inch singles in picture bags... all that.

ROBERTA BAYLEY/REDFERNS

Inner sanctum: the Stiff office, '77

Stiff Records supremo Jake Riviera, outside his office, July 19, 1977

But most of the lifts have been uninspired. I feel sorry for all these overweight executives trying to come to terms with what's going on. They take an idea and sterilise it out of existence."

Stiff's success, he adds, has coincided with the reassessment of established values forced by the emergence of the new wave in rock, and the label's commercial prosperity (only Max Wall's "England's Glory" 45 failed to recoup recording costs) has, he feels, encouraged the growth of other independent concerns.

"John Otway and Willy Barrett came in, right. And they had their album recorded, they had the sleeve designed and printed and they wanted Stiff to put it out. I said, 'You're nearly there. Do it yourself.' They did. And it sold and then Polydor signed them. That's gratifying. We proved to people that you could do it without the help of EMI or CBS or Decca. Things are changing. Slowly perhaps, but they're changing.

"People are beginning to realise that it no longer has to take three albums, two years and 200 gigs a year to break a band. Like, The Damned have been with us a year and they've got a Top 30 album. And we're committed to them. Like we are to Nick Lowe and Elvis. We'll stay with them as long as they want to be with us. We're not interested in signing an act to a seven-year, five-album deal and then dumping them after two albums if they're not cutting it commercially. You've got to stick with people you believe in.

"That's why we only sign people to the label who've got a clear sense of direction, people who're bright. People who've got a grip on it. I'm not interested in signing any old drongo that comes in off the street. We'd only have the Wombles and the Muppets on Stiff if we were."

STIFF'S OFFICE IS presently located in Alexander Street, tucked away anonymously behind Porchester Road and Westbourne Grove. They rent the ground floor (two rooms cluttered with Stiff paraphernalia), and basement (two more rooms, less chaotically furnished), of a building owned by Blackhill, whose own offices occupy the first floor. BP Fallon lives somewhere on the premises, merely to enhance the fairly lunatic atmosphere of the joint, I imagine.

There is at Stiff a permanent staff of six: two secretaries, Suzanne Spiro and Cynthia Lole; Barney Bubbles, the art director; general manager Paul Conroy; Dave Robinson; and, of course, Adolf Riviera.

This morning, after the dispatch of the American journalist he'd rechristened Pearl Harbour, Jake has copped a sympathetic ear to the tapes of a forthcoming, one-off project and offered a contract to the parties involved – "the standard Stiff rip-off contract" – organised the details of another deal, blistered the ears of an endless number of callers, dictated a volume of letters and, more pressingly, finalised the organisation of the week's Silly Stunt.

This is it: CBS are holding their annual blow-out convention at London's Hilton. The entire upper echelon of the CBS empire is in town, accompanied by the label's more prestigious artists, some of whom will be performing for the exclusive pleasure of the executives gathered there. Jake has a little extra entertainment planned for them. Elvis Costello will perform an unscheduled set on the street outside the Hilton as the CBS folk leave at lunchtime.

Two of the floating cast of assorted nutters that gravitate around the Stiff office – Kosmo and Alphonse, GP & The Rumour roadies – are already outside the Hilton with placards and sandwich boards advertising Elvis' gig at Dingwalls and welcoming CBS to England, The Home Of Stiff Records.

Back at Stiff, meanwhile, the joint is jumping: "Get some cabs, Cynthia. We need wheels. Now, jump. Right, where's Elvis? Who's here and who's coming with us?"

The Stiff Shock Squadron assembles: Elvis has arrived looking very dapper in two-tone shoes, sports jacket and checked trousers (with a crease you could cut your throat on). The Attractions, Elvis' spanking new band, are here.

Roadies dash about. Jake is still screaming for cabs. Telephones are ringing like alarm bells announcing Armageddon. "I can't answer it now," Jake shouts. "Tell him I'm just off with Elvis to scare the hell out of CBS."

The cabs arrive. Jake grabs a bottle of cider. He orders everyone out on to the street. "Let's get shaking."

We pile out of the office. Jake bundles people into cars, shouting directions. The Transit with the band and reinforcements for Kosmo and Alphonse drives off; Elvis ambles nonchalantly to his car. Several other individuals leap in

BARRY PLUMMER ; DOUGLAS DOIG/EVENING STANDARD/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

beside him. Jake is still running about calling people out of the pub, leaving instructions for Cynthia. Elvis' car drives off with its boot flapping open. Jake races after it and slams it. Five of us are crammed in a second car. The driver looks bewildered.

"It's like the Keystone Cops," Paul Conroy mumbles laconically. "Take it away, Jake."

KOSMO AND ALPHONSE are parading along the façade of the Hilton when we arrive. The Hilton's elaborately attired commissionaires follow them with belligerent stares. "See Elvis on your doorstep. See Elvis at Dingwalls tonight. Roll up for Elvis," Kosmo announces, like a demented streetcorner newspaper seller.

Elvis, with the Vox practice amp that Jake has bought him strapped over his shoulder, strolls casually to the front of the hotel and plugs in his Fender Jazzmaster. "Go to it, Elvis boy," Jake barks, between fits of laughter. Paul Conroy and El's PR, Glen Colson, look apprehensive. Elvis suddenly locks into "Welcome To The Working Week" and we're away. "Look at him go," enthuses Jake. "See that glint in his eye? He's well off now."

Elvis hollers the lyric with unrestrained passion, knocking out chords on the Fender with relentless venom. The commissionaires back away, pretending indifference but throwing bewildered backward glances at this curious spectacle.

A group of Japanese tourists waddle by armed with souvenirs and cameras: the scene before them seems to reinforce their secret conviction that the English are all crazy. Elvis is now playing "Waiting For The End Of The World".

A group of refugees from the CBS bash wander out of the Hilton grasping little paper tuck bags bearing the legend: A Big Fat Thank You From Ted Nugent. They gape at Elvis. He's now singing "Less Than Zero". He ignores them.

Jake is swigging cider and cackling gleefully as the crowd outside the Hilton begins to swell with tourists and CBS representatives. Kosmo and Alphonse are still strolling the length of the hotel front with their placards and boards. "Do you know any Neil Diamond songs?" asks a smarmy city slicker in blue mohair.

"Listen, mate," Paul Conroy intervenes, "Neil Diamond doesn't do any of Elvis' songs, so Elvis isn't going to do any of his. Hop it."

"All right. Who's in charge here?" It's the security officer from the Hilton. He looks like an extra from *The Sweeney*, with close-cropped hair and an unpleasantly aggressive air about him.

"Who's in charge? Who's in CHARGE?" Jake shouts. "NO-ONE'S in charge. It's a free country and we're all free individuals expressing ourselves. We can do what we like. Who are you, anyway? From the hotel, are you? Must be American. Did you know that some parts of America date back to 1934? Well? Are you from America? Are you American? Uh?"

The fellow reels back in confusion: "I'm not American," he splutters. "I'm from Hampshire." He attempts to compose himself before Jake launches another verbal onslaught. "Anyway, this is a caution. Move on. You look suspicious."

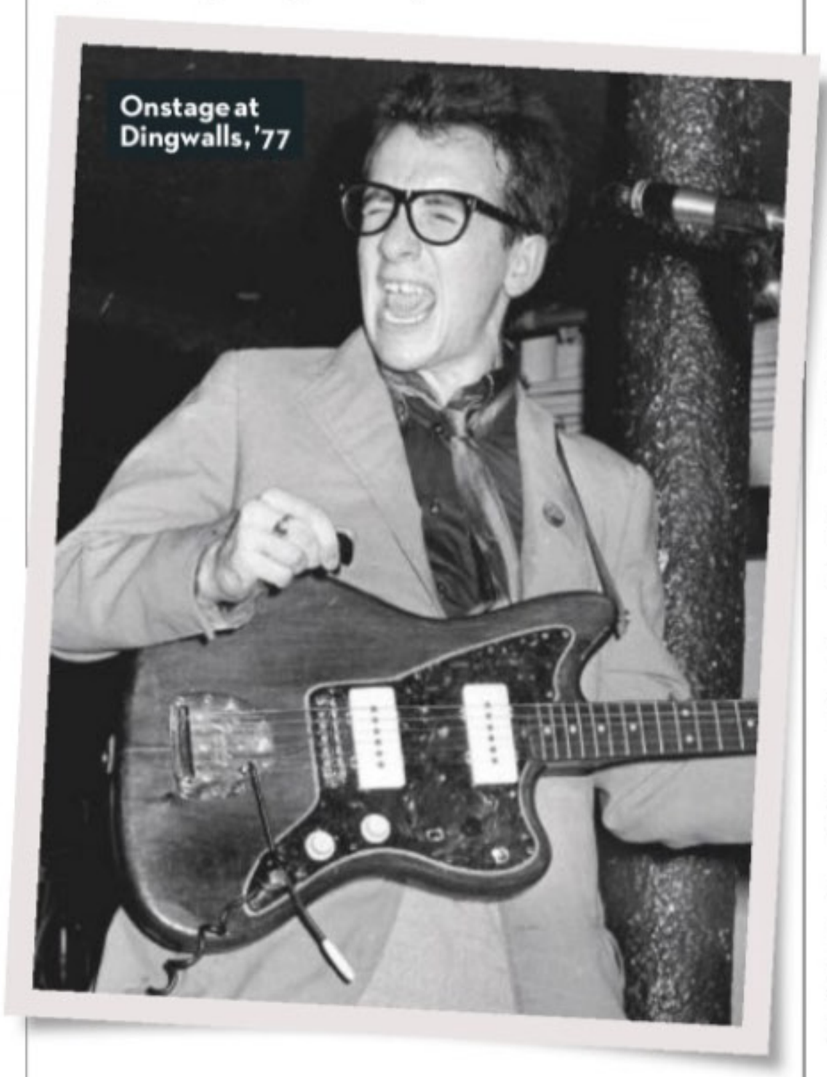
By the time Elvis starts "Mystery Dance" it seems that at least half of the CBS convention is on the street outside the Hilton; Matthew Kaufman, Jonathan Richman's manager, is there. So is Herbie Cohen. Even Walter Yetnikoff, president of CBS Records International, has been drawn into the action. Everyone, it seems, is clapping and singing along with Elvis. Then the Law arrives.

A young constable, clearly embarrassed, has been summoned by our friend from Hampshire. He has a dekko at Elvis and a word with Jake. "He's NOT busking, man!" "He's just SINGING IN THE STREET! You can't stop people SINGING IN THE STREET!"

The confused PC has every intention of trying just that.

"GET DOWN, ELVIS!" Kaufman bellows, enjoying himself enormously, it seems.

The constable gets out his radio: he's got six punk rockers and a crowd of 50 people causing a disturbance outside the Hilton, he informs headquarters. Three squad cars and a police van are on the scene within minutes. The Old Bill pile out, anticipating a riot by the look of them.


Onstage at Dingwalls, '77

Jake argues with an inspector. "These people are ENJOYING themselves, man! Look at them! They're clapping and singing!" The inspector is clearly appalled. Elvis is still singing his heart out.

"Oh God," mutters Paul Conroy as the police inspector advances threateningly on Elvis.

"Move on, son," he tells El.

Elvis takes one stride to his left and then continues singing.

"Right," says the inspector. "You're nicked."

He arrests Elvis.

"Colson," snaps Jake as the crowd boos the police, "follow them. Vine Street station. Get on the case. I want Elvis sprung. Can't have him in the nick all night. He's got a soundcheck at Dingwalls at four. Spring him."

Colson dashes off. He's followed by Paul Conroy. A sound tactic, this; Colson has a finely honed sense of the absurd, as Conroy well knows. The thought of Colson at large on his own in a police station could provoke disaster (the Old Bill not having much sense of humour, as we know). Indeed, we learn later that Conroy reached the station to find Colson wandering down a line of constables greeting them individually with a cheery, "Evening all!"

"Five more minutes of that," Conroy reflected, later, "and we'd all have been sent down for life."

JAKE, MEANWHILE, HAS raced back to Alexander Street. He tumbles into the office. "Cynthia! David Gentle [*Stiff's lawyer*] on the phone. They've nicked Elvis and I want him out. Jesus."

Colson is on the other telephone. Jake conducts both conversations at once, receiving information on the arrest from Colson and relating it to Gentle. "They've booked him for unlawful obstruction. You spring him. Great. Gentle thinks we'll get him off with a fine. They can't keep him in overnight. I need A DRINK."

So did I. Lee Brilleaux, Sparko and John Mayo of the Feelgoods are already in the boozer with Nick Lowe, who's producing their new album. Lee and Kosmo (who neatly escaped the clutches of the law outside the Hilton) are deep in conversation about the delights of Canvey Island as a holiday resort. Kosmo used to enjoy vacations there as a kid: spent most of his time murdering hordes of crabs on the beaches there. Used to rip off their legs and stick needles in their eyes. That kind of thing.

"'Ere, Lee," Kosmo says, "I wish crabs 'ad ears." "Why's that?" asks Lee. "'Cos you could tear 'em off," laughs Kosmo, who steers the conversation towards the sex life of jellyfish. "No, jellyfish don't fuck," Lee informs Kosmo, who's been wondering how the species multiplies. "They sort of split up. Like worms.

"I 'ate jellyfish as it 'appens. No time for 'em. Vicious fings. Like adders. If they bite you it's not certain death, but they'll make you ill."

Lee sinks another pint. I wondered how the Feelgoods were getting on with Nick Lowe. "He's a bastard," says Lee. "Stickler for time, old Basher. Doesn't understand complications of British licensing laws. The pubs close at three. He wants us in the studio at two. I'll just have a swift 'arf."

Lee's had a swift 'arf before him on the bar for over an hour. Every time Lowe asks him when he's going to leave, Lee says, "Just finish this 'arf, Bash, and we'll be off." He's actually downing brandies by the bucketload.

"I can't get them out of the pub," Lowe complains later to Jake. "They just won't move." Jake sympathises. He'd been out boozing with Lee the previous night.

"Annuver one, Lee?" asks Kosmo.

"Just a swift 'arf. Must dash," Lee replies, knocking back a brandy.

THE FEELGOODS ARE finally dragged out of the pub and dispatched to the studio with Nick Lowe, and the mood at Stiff relaxes for the first time.

Ian Dury wanders in, looking like some bedraggled tinker. He has a single out soon on Stiff called "Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll" (classic Dury opus, this); he's also been producing Wreckless Eric, whose "(I'd Go The) Whole Wide World" was one of the standout attractions of the *Bunch Of Stiffs* compilation (which is to be

BARRY PLUMMER

The Attractions: a damned hot combo

followed by *Hits Greatest Stiffs*, which will include most of the early Stiffs 45s, incidentally).

He wanders down to see Barney Bubbles, and BP Fallon wanders in to be insulted. How are you, Beep. "I'm effervescent, man," he smiles, adjusting his jockey cap. Archie Leggett, who's been recording with Wings' Jimmy McCulloch, nods his head around the door. "I'm shattered," he moans, and vanishes.

The phones continue to ring, and Jake verbals merrily: "Are you asking me for money... Is that it? Yes, that is a mistake. I'll put you on the guestlist if you bring along a cheque book and spend lots of money on me. Of course I'm out of my crust... That's why I'm so talented and make so much money. Groovy... Advice is free. Consultation costs money. Stop wasting my time!"

Elvis arrives. He has to appear in court the next morning. He expects a £5 fine. The police were courteous, he says. He'd like a copy of his album sent around to Vine Street. Paul Conroy announces over the intercom system that he's got a chart position for *My Aim Is True*.

"Please God, I don't believe you're there, but make it good," Jake prays.

The album, we learn, has already sold 11,000 copies. It's only been on sale for three days.

"Not bad," says Elvis with immense calm. "Now let's get Dingwalls over and done."

TUESDAY NIGHT AT Dingwalls: the joint is so packed, you couldn't squeeze in a greased monkey after 10pm. The sense of anticipation is choking. The only person in the place whose nerves have survived the day intact is Elvis. Indeed, throughout the day he's displayed the utmost cool. Even his arrest, on the very day of his official London debut with The Attractions, seemed to affect him not at all.

One gets the impression of an artist whose self-confidence is unassailable. The unanimous critical praise with which his music has recently been received he accepts modestly. But he knew it was due, and expected it, I'm sure.

The Attractions pick their way through the glare behind him. Pete Thomas, the former rhythm merchant with Chilli Willi (returned to these shores after a spell in America), settles in behind the traps, Bruce Thomas (ex-Quiver and composer of odes to Queen's Park Rangers) eases in on bass and Steven Young sneaks in behind the keys. Elvis straps on a Fender and the action starts with "Welcome To The Working Week".

They then play the most startling set I've experienced since Television pinned me to the deck in Glasgow. This combo is so damned hot they could reduce the Post Office Tower to a mess of molten metal in 60 seconds flat.

The sound is naked and aggressive – only

"JAKE RIVIERA WAS ON THE RECEIVING END OF 'SOMEONE''S FIST... THE REST OF US JUST GOT ABSOLUTELY LEGLESS"

ALLAN JONES

"Alison" offers a respite from the intensity – dominated by El's wonderfully spare guitar style (it's somewhere between the effect Lennon achieved on "I Found Out" and Neil Young's classic apocalyptic raunch).

Young's keyboards sparkle between the spaces with a sinister shine, while Thomas and Thomas punch out the rhythm with emphatic panache. The familiar brilliance of the songs from ...*Aim* were whacked out with an extraordinary force, fierce expressions of frustration, rage and revenge: "End Of The World" was alarmingly violent, climaxing with a chilling scream of *"Dear Lord..."* and trailing into silence. "Red Shoes", "Miracle Man", "Zero" (with audience participation), "Mystery Dance" and "Blame It On Cain" were all dispatched with stunning clarity. Then Elvis moved in for the kill with a batch of new songs that emphasised beyond argument his individual and remarkable talent: there was "Night Rally", built around Pete Thomas' military percussion attack, the epic "The Beat", a fearsome, haunting nightmare parade of fears repressed and finally confronted, and the utterly vindictive essays, "Lipstick Vogue" and "Lip Service (That's All You'll Ever Get From Me)". And then (as if a boy could stand any more!!) there was a song called "Watching The Detectives": simply the best new song I've heard this year. Set against a spastic reggae backdrop, Elvis intones this really scary narrative about a guy and his girl watching some hack US cop opera. She becomes sexually aroused by the violence on the screen...

"They beat him up until the teardrops start/But he can't be wounded 'cos he's got no heart," he sings... and suddenly the narrator realises that he and his girl are part of the drama: *"They call it instant justice but it's past the legal limit/ Someone scratching at the window, I wonder 'Who is it?'"* It's the Detectives creeping through the dark, natch.

The song ends with the singer wasting his girl. *"It only took my little finger to BLOW YOU AWAY!"*

I saw Elvis and the boys the following night at the Hope & Anchor. I'm still shaking. Elvis vanished after the gig, less than enamoured of Dingwalls' general vibe, apparently.

The rest of us finished off the day in style. I don't recall the actual details (conveniently, perhaps), but Jake Riviera was on the receiving end of "someone's" fist and got himself flattened. Matthew Kaufman was ejected for diverting attention from the ensuing bout of fisticuffs by, uh, urinating in public. The rest of us just got absolutely legless.

"The perfect end to a perfect day at Stiff," smiled a tired and emotional Paul Conroy as we stumbled into the moonlight, conveniently providing me with a final quote.

REX FEATURES

THIS YEAR'S MODEL

"I don't wanna kiss you, I don't wanna touch..."
EC lays down the rules of Attractions.

BY NEIL SPENCER

RELEASED MARCH 17, 1978

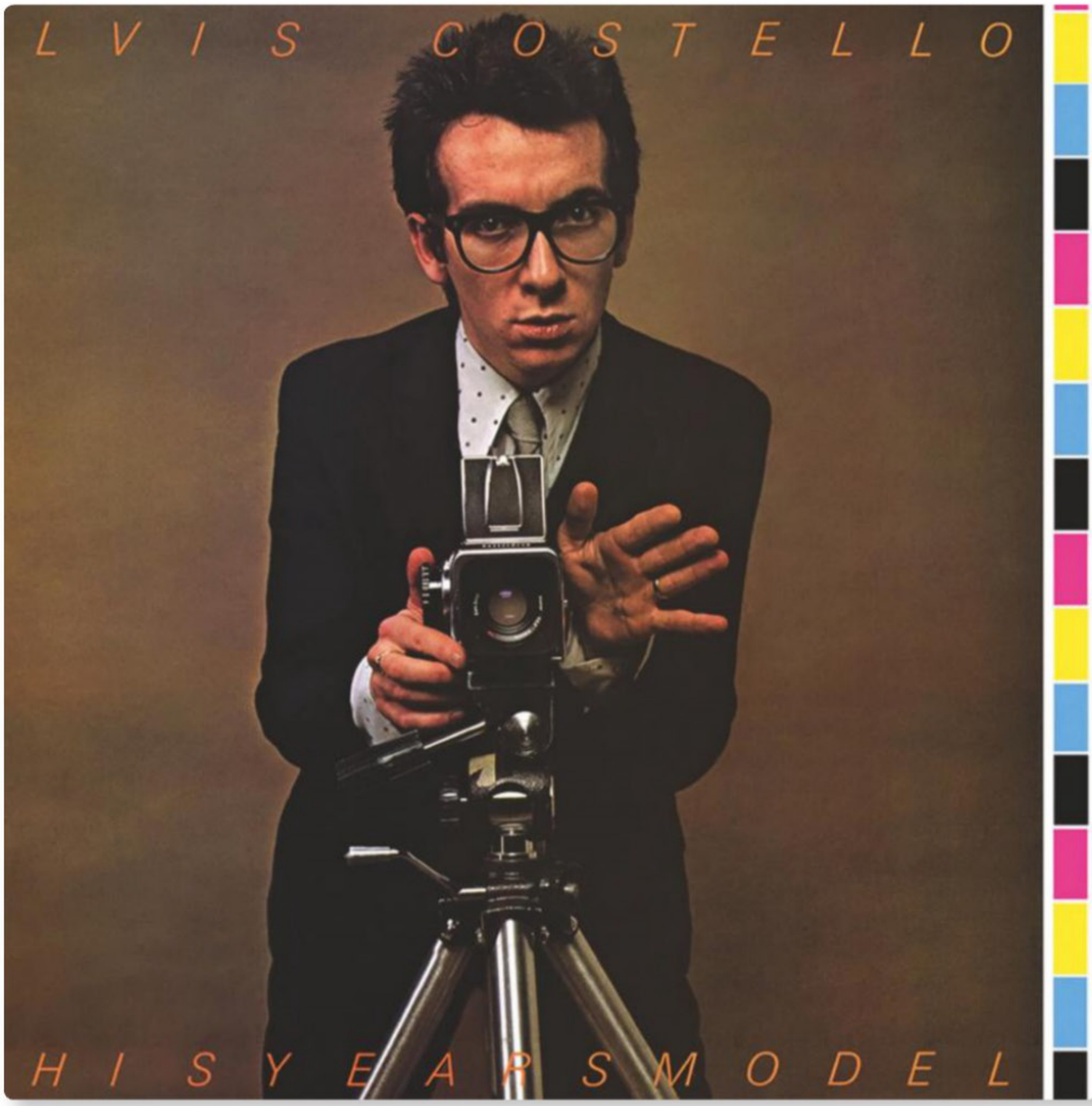
RELEASED JUST EIGHT months after his debut, *This Year's Model* proclaimed an altogether different pop animal to the geeky songwriter of *My Aim Is True*. Its cover portrayed Costello not as oddball wannabe but as young meteor, poised behind a Hasselblad camera, pulling the strings, in control. The music had taken on an equally dramatic shift with the recruitment of The Attractions, whose well-schooled talents had slotted together cannily during 1977's frenetic gigging. In the studio, with producer Nick Lowe on inspired form, the quartet emerged with a record that sounded like no-one else, a masterpiece that alchemised Costello from aspiring songwriter to fully formed creator. Hereafter he was a player.

The change was not altogether unexpected. "Watching The Detectives" had already crashed the charts, and though Costello was not himself punk, the anger, confrontation and self-lacerating honesty of his songs, together with the absolute fury of his live shows, slotted sweetly into the mayhem of 1977. On or offstage, there was no spikier presence in town.

Few, however, had anticipated an album as startling and focused as *This Year's Model*. Sonically, it was utterly distinct. Whatever its sentiments, the punk revolution was founded on guitar rock, and while Costello's Fender is a driving presence here (see the opening splash of power chords on "No Action"), the album is defined by the insinuating whine of Nieve's Vox Continental – an instrument wildly out of favour since its 1960s heyday – and by the booming precision of a rhythm section that Lowe made the centrepiece of his mix. The results could be Spectoresque in their onslaught ("Pump It Up"), slide into jangle pop ("Lip Service") or turn mysterioso psych with a flick of Nieve's keys. At the record's heart was Costello himself, unleashing a torrent of acidic wordplay on a dozen songs that were each distinct but whose sprays of imagery bled into each other. Thematically, *This Year's Model* is virtually a concept album, summed up by two words: woman trouble.

And what trouble. The sneered opening lines – "*I don't wanna kiss you, I don't wanna touch*" – were the antithesis of gooey pop tradition, though elsewhere Costello mutated from anti-romantic ("*I don't want anybody saying you belong to me*") to embittered loser ("*Knowing you're with him is driving me crazy*"), sinister stalker ("*I'll be at the video and I will be watching*") and passionate suitor ("*It's you, not just another mouthful of lipstick vogue*"). Emotionally, *This Year's Model*'s withering put-downs and proclamations of passion make for a contradictory but electrifying ride through modern romance. Presciently, telephones play a big part in the narrative, with Costello either waiting on a call or ranting down a mouthpiece while claiming that he's "*not a telephone junkie*".

Curiously, for an album that screamed modernity (Barney Bubbles' graphics emphasised the point), *This Year's Model* has a strong 1960s streak. While its deliberately miscropped cover evoked David Bailey (and David Hemmings in *Blow-Up*), the gangster persona of "Hand In Hand" is pure Kray Twin (and Harry Flowers in *Performance*). Its *Vogue* cover models and the Chelsea Costello has no desire to visit belong not to King's Road 1977, but to the chi-chi West London of a previous era. For most pop writers, the catwalk had long since ceased to hold any fascination; despite the protests that "*you don't really give a damn about this year's girl*", Elvis seemed



THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"*This Year's Model* is simply so ridiculously good that one's immediate inclinations are to clamber effusively over the top, superlative peaking superlative to the point where well-meaning enthusiasm turns an unattractive tint of bloated sycophancy."
NICK KENT, NME, MARCH 11, 1978

"The themes of infidelity and humiliation are pursued with relentless vigour and imagination... This Year's Masterpiece. The best thing I've heard since the last best thing I heard."
ALLAN JONES, MELODY MAKER, MARCH 11, 1978

fixated, "*Out in the fashion show/Down in the bargain bin*".

"I Don't Wanna Go To Chelsea" is one of several stand-outs, a snarl against empty-headed glamour built on an itchy reggae riff from Costello's guitar, though Costello has mused that he was also trying to rewrite The Kinks' "All Day And All Of The Night". Reggae was everywhere in 1978, and Costello had already used a laid-back rhythm for "Detectives" (and, clunkily, for "Less Than Zero") but on *This Year's Model*, reggae's influence is subtler, yet pervasive. The drop-outs of "This Year's Girl", the opening riffs of "The Beat" and "Living In Paradise" and the neo-dub of "Chelsea" all owe a debt to Jamaica. The switch from edgy reggae to cavernous pop is constant, whether in a single song ("The Beat") or in the gear change between, say, "Paradise" and the high-tempo rock of "Lipstick Vogue".

The clever architecture of the songs, their dramatic key shifts into bridges, middle eights and choruses, called for a musicianly acumen beyond most emergent acts, but The Attractions never faltered (the singing bassline of "Lip Service", for example, remains worthy of McCartney). Nick Lowe's production likewise doesn't miss a trick – the backward tape that opens Side Two with "Hand In Hand" adds a touch of psych menace, the handclaps that punctuate "Lip Service" give a nod to '60s pop – though Basher also knows when to sit back and let the band rip on "Pump It Up", whose breathless, accusatory vocals bear a hint of Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues".

The glum "Night Rally" doesn't seem to have much to do with the rest of *This Year's Model*, a musical plod at variance with the melodic cavalcade elsewhere. At the time, though, with the National Front a presence on the streets, its anti-fascist imagery carried an urgency that finds an echo today, as do images of "*the corporation logo flashing on and off in the sky*". A necessary piece of ballast.

Beyond its exhilarating musicianship, what do the lyrical flourishes of *This Year's Model* amount to beyond a man deep in the most troubled kind of love, one that's "*just a tumour, you gotta cut it out*"? ("I wished he liked girls more," remarked critic Robert Christgau).

Part of the album's appeal was and is that its songs apply ruthless authenticity, one of the battle cries of the punk insurrection, to personal relationships. So jealousy, betrayal, longing, repulsion, self-hatred, vengeance – bring 'em on. It's about being real, instead of "*just going through the motions*", about wanting something deeper than "*those disco synthesisers*" or the phoney world of the latest celebrity pin-up. In modern times, *This Year's Model* still chimes perfectly.

TRACKMARKS THIS YEAR'S MODEL

1. No Action ★★★★★
2. This Year's Girl ★★★★★
3. The Beat ★★★★
4. Pump It Up ★★★★
5. Little Triggers ★★★★
6. You Belong To Me ★★★★
7. Hand In Hand ★★★★★
8. (I Don't Want To Go To) Chelsea ★★★★★
9. Lip Service ★★★★★
10. Living In Paradise ★★★
11. Lipstick Vogue ★★★★
12. Night Rally ★★★

Label: Stiff
Produced by: Nick Lowe
Recorded at: Eden Studios, London
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitars), Steve Nieve (keyboards), Bruce Thomas (bass), Pete Thomas (drums)
Highest chart position: UK 4; US 30

ARCHIVE ♦ 1978 ♦

"I don't need you to tell me I'm good. I know how good I am."

This Year's Model **has propelled Costello to new levels of fame and, back from touring the States, The Attractions are in frankly terrifying shape. What better, then, than a St Patrick's Day jaunt to Belfast with the cream of the British press and, of course, ALLAN JONES? Pleasantries remain elusive: "I don't give a shit. I've already forgotten who Bob Dylan was..."**

TAKEN FROM MELODY MAKER 25/3/1978

THIS YEAR'S MODEL and The Attractions were brought last Friday into the, ahem, strife-torn territories of Belfast from Dublin courtesy of Irish hi-speed rail. Da Blighty Hacks and their escorts, meanwhile, flew in from London on a wing and an atheist's mumbled asides. I had no immediate impression of the hostilities.

I had thought at least to cop a view of Strummer and Mick Jones and a few of their cronies in paramilitary drag throwing a moody shape or two against the barricades while the troops looked on superciliously.

But the lads from The Clash were nowhere to be found, and the war's presence at Aldergrove airport was relegated to a number of desultory wire-mesh fences, tank-traps, and a roadblock manned by a contingent of soldiers who at first glance looked too young to be taken seriously; then you clocked the artillery they were wielding and forgot all about the ruddy, boyish complexions and kept your head down and the gabble clamped.

Da Blighty Hacks, on their first tour of duty here, were only mildly alarmed when their driver announced that he carried a revolver and accepted with commendable nonchalance the information that the hotel at which we were billeted was not so long ago redesigned by something explosive lobbed through the restaurant window. "I wasn't hungry, anyway," reflected Elvis' PR, Glen Colson (and didn't you just know he'd make an appearance somewhere along the frontline!).

It was St Patrick's Day in Belfast, but as we motored into the city there was little evidence of either celebration or devastation; we could have been anywhere on the South Circular.

The Mickey Jupp Band were onstage, ignoring the impatient demands of the Ulster Hall audience for Elvis, as we arrived. The strangled echoes raced through the draughty hallways, followed by the swearing and stomping boots of restless locals in loudmouthed jackets and catalogue trousers (to borrow a description from Ian Dury).

Elvis and the Attractions were in their dressing room sharing a drink and a joke with Da Hacks. There is some talk of their American tour, history so recent that the ink's still wet on its pages, a gruelling but satisfying jaunt from all accounts, despite the hazards of travelling in sub-zero temperatures and blizzards that reduced the tourbus to a barely mobile wreck by the time they reached New York.

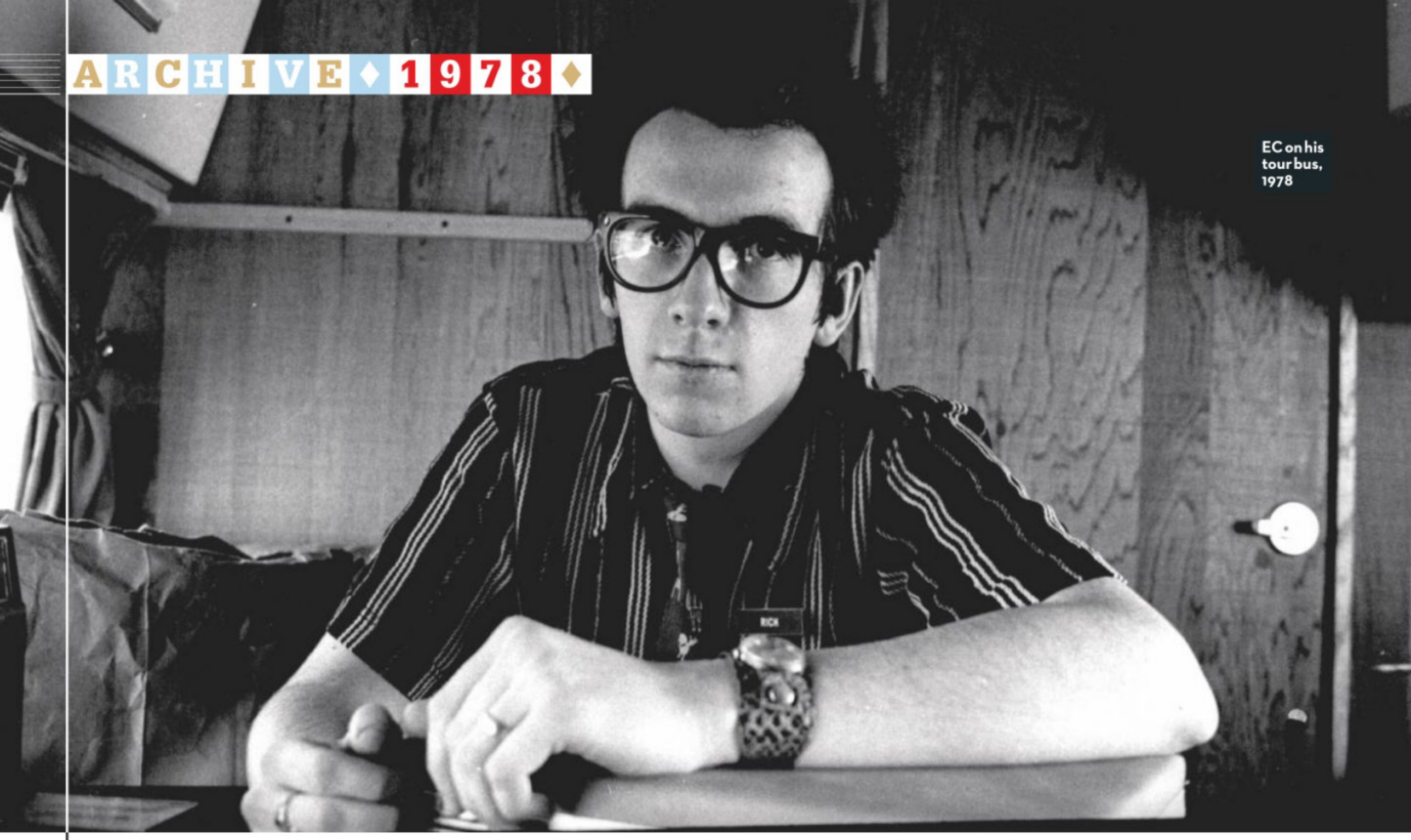
It was by then without one door, smacked off in a collision with a snowdrift, and had to be pushed along the freeway by our freezing heroes (overtones of Eastwood's *The Gauntlet*, here).

It is, however, made clear the moment that EC and The Attractions bang into "Waiting For The End Of The World" that seven weeks of intensive US gigging has honed to a vicious edge music that is anyway sharper than that of almost any other current rock band. The last time I saw the outfit in action was at the Nashville in December and they were lagging slightly, but still putting out more heat than most of us could take without screaming.

Tonight the music is slicing across the airwaves in lateral sheets, the sheer impact of which is unimpaired by the inconsistent

EBET ROBERTS/GETTY IMAGES

Live at the Capitol Theatre, Passaic, NJ, May 5, 1978



EC on his tour bus, 1978

acoustics. They perform 18 songs (four of them encores) in something like 80 minutes. It's one relentless rush at the gates of hell, with venom pumped straight off the stage and into the bloodstream.

Time was when Elvis moved not at all onstage. He'd stand icy calm and immobile at the storm centre of the musical carnage, maybe flickering an eyelid if he seemed occasionally moved, yelping lyrics to songs of truthful vengeance with all the hypnotic passion he could muster (which was some passion, Harry, believe me!).

He's still no Nureyev on the boards, but he's developed this sudden jerking movement that takes him maybe two or three steps either side of the microphone whenever he decides to dash off one of his briefly alarming guitar figures (they're almost too brief to be described as proper solos).

He did it first on "Less Than Zero", and repeated it again on "The Beat". That time it conveniently carried him out of the way of a crowd of loonies who staged a pitch invasion, shouted a few obscure slogans, and were hastily dragged away to whatever fate awaits such dramatic interlopers (later identified as members of a band called The Outcasts, who pulled a similar stunt when The Clash played here). Elvis ignores them and gets back on the case via "This Year's Girl".

On "Watching The Detectives", Elvis forsakes his guitar to stroll out along some edge of

"IF SOMEONE GIVES ME A GOOD REVIEW, IT DOESN'T MEAN I'M GOING TO FALL AT THEIR FEET"

paranoid fright, and "Pump It Up" and "You Belong To Me" relax the tension and bring the set to a thrilling conclusion. Still, Belfast is rabid for more, and they perform four exhilarating encores: "Mystery Dance", "Miracle Ban", the devastating "Radio, Radio" (one cinch of a single) and a climactic, destructive version of "I'm Not Angry" that exhausts us all.

Then Elvis rips out the lead from his guitar with whiplash reflexes and vanishes. "ALLLVERSS COSSTELLER! T'ANK YOUSE ... ALLLVERSS COSTELLER!" yells the emcee as The Attractions speed off behind him, with Pete Thomas walking straight through his kit into the wings.

The night, though, is still young. Elvis and manager Jake Riviera arrive back at the hotel in the grip of a mischievous humour that provokes them into engaging Da Hacks in a quick bout of verbal wrestling.

An unfortunate New York correspondent is Mr Riviera's first target, and he makes the mistake of answering back: he puts up a valiant rearguard defence but Jake outflanks him, cuts off his line of retreat and forces a points decision.

Elvis, meanwhile, is delighting in his own impersonation of the Van Morrison of the post-modern generation. He becomes so intimidating (to the considerable distraction of Glen Colson, who apparently feels responsible for the egos of Da Hacks) that one of our number makes a discreet exit that's possibly more involuntary than we would like to believe.

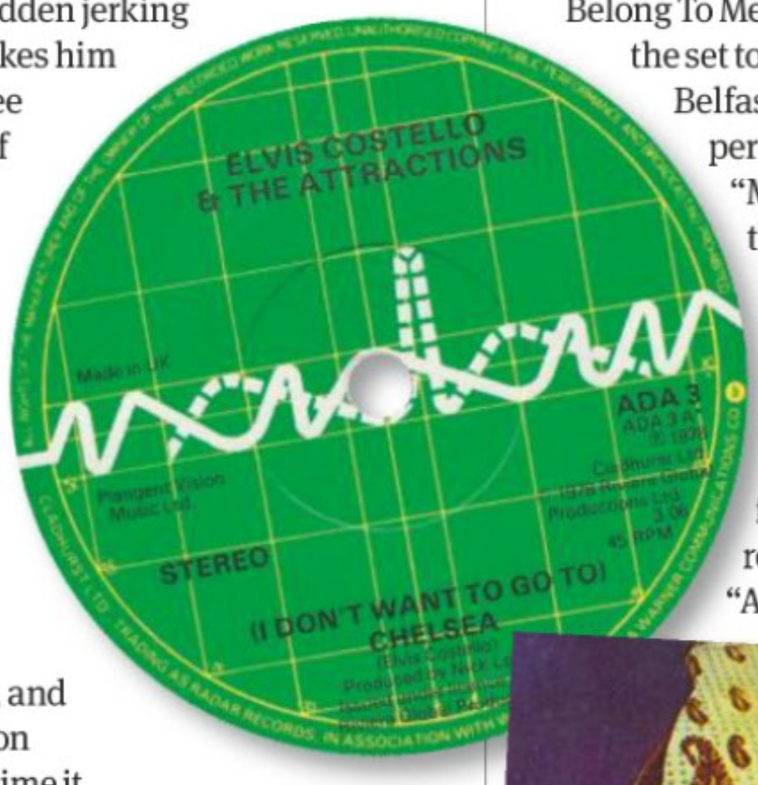
"Just because someone gives me a good review doesn't mean that I'm going to fall at their feet," Elvis emphasises (though no-one has recommended this action).

"I don't need you, or you, or him, or anyone to tell me that I'm good. I know how good I am. I didn't need anyone to tell me that *This Year's Model* was a good album, I knew it was.

"I don't think it's the greatest album ever recorded. It's not going to stop the world. But I had the imagination to come up with that album, and I expect more imagination from the critics who wrote about it."

The *London Evening Standard* wonders how Mr Costello feels when he reads of comparisons between himself and the likes of Bowie, Neil Young and Bob Dylan.

"I don't give a shit," replies Mr Costello succinctly. "I've already forgotten who Bob Dylan was."



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ARMED FORCES

This time it's war! A salute to the album originally known as 'Emotional Fascism', a barbed pop masterpiece. BY DAVID QUANTICK

RELEASED JANUARY 5, 1979

WHEN AN ARTIST and the people around the artist are peaking – when their commercial and critical success is matched by their own confidence and ability to realise what they want to do – elements often seem to fall into place. So, for example, almost every song on *Armed Forces* seems to fit the main theme of human relationships as tiny wars, militarism as simile for love, and the whole linking up of love, war and fascism.

So, for example, it's a piece of sequencing wit that causes the first words sung on the record to be "*Oh, I just don't know where to begin*" and the last to be "*I will return/I will not burn*". So, for example, it's a record that sounds as 1979 and new wave as, say, The Boomtown Rats' *Tonic For The Troops* or the Stadium Dogs' *What's Next* or Squeeze's *Cool For Cats*, but it's also a record that's confident enough to take on every pop music landmark from Abba to *Abbey Road*, but on its own terms. *Armed Forces* is an album that could only have been released in 1979, but – like *Blonde On Blonde*, like *Exile On Main Street*, like *Innervisions* – it's also an album that's of its time and stands outside its time. And it contains one of the greatest singles ever made. And it's a concept album.

Concept albums were apparently one of the many sworn enemies of punk rock, but they were never far away – Sham 69's *That's Life*, The Jam's *Setting Sons* and The Stranglers' *Meninblack* being prime examples. The best example, of course, the most coherent and brilliant concept album released during the punk and new wave era, was *Armed Forces*. With superb artwork (Barney Bubbles working with aptly named French collective Bazooka) reflecting the contents of the record, *Armed Forces*' secondary, and original working, title of 'Emotional Fascism' made this a perfectly themed collection of songs; one that the likes of Pink Floyd would never have been able to put together so coherently and so powerfully.

"Goon Squad". "Green Shirt". "Oliver's Army". "Two Little Hitlers". "Senior Service". Lyrics about power and betrayal and soldiers and "*corporals into corporal punishment*" and "*the final solution*". The jerky goosestep beat of the new wave and the singer's obsession with control and revenge channelled into the bleakly honest world of emotion as fascism (and what emotion – engineer Roger Bechirian recalled Costello singing with such force that the "moisture" in his voice caused the microphones to repeatedly short out).

Armed Forces is the first album where Costello and his producer Nick Lowe – the greatest pop pasticheur since Paul McCartney – realised that they could have their pop music cake and eat it, satirising and pastiching the entire history of the hit parade for fun and profit (other Costello albums take on entire genres and win, but never with the sheer glee and bile of *Armed Forces*, which dropped on the chart scene of 1979 like an atom bomb disguised as a K-Tel party album). *Armed Forces* has all the piss and vinegar and spleen of its predecessor, *This Year's Model*, but disguised as fizzy pop and cartoons.

The songs – full of references to Roy Orbison ("Busy Bodies"), Abba ("Oliver's Army"), The Beatles ("Party Girl"), David Bowie ("Green Shirt") and Ian Dury ("Sunday's Best"; well, written for him, anyway) and many others – are produced

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"There's less gut attack, less overall aggression; instead, a more relaxed display of energy and precision, of the kind that springs from unusual self-confidence, and the confidence is largely justified. Who else currently makes 12-cut albums without a single duff track?"
TONY RAYNS, MELODY MAKER, DECEMBER 30, 1978

with a verve unlike any other. Apart from the much-discussed "Dancing Queen" piano played by Steve Nieve on "Oliver's Army" – a song inspired, said Costello, by a visit to Northern Ireland – there's the insane double-tracked singing on "Goon Squad", where a faraway Costello keeps pace with his own lead vocals, the absurd looping bassline played by Bruce Thomas on "Party Girl" in tribute to The Beatles' "I Want You (She's So Heavy)", the sequencer on "Green Shirt" (with its reference to Madison, Wisconsin's bizarrely named medical facility, the Quisling Clinic). And over it all there's Elvis Costello's voice, at its sibilant, jerky ("*I am starting to function/In the us-ual/Way*," he sings on "Big Boys" like a robot Steve Harley), mucoid, furious best. Charles Shaar Murray once noted Costello's ability to soften his voice for the radio as well as belt out the bile, and you hear that facility all over *Armed Forces* when he moulds his vocals to fit the songs as they range from poppy to angry to cynical.

Armed Forces is an astonishing record, well-rounded (astonishingly so, for an album written in hotel rooms and on tour buses) but also immediate (most songs were apparently nailed on the first take), commercial, intelligent and furious. But it was the end of something, not the beginning. Costello was apparently already concerned about repeating himself stylistically (B-sides and new songs recorded at this time, like "Wednesday Week" and "Talking In The Dark", suggest that he was now drawing on himself for inspiration). America, and the mainstream, were not so much beckoning as demanding he come and get in a hot tub full of cocaine and money with them.

And in 1979, two events – one trivial, the other much less so – occurred that were to change Elvis Costello's career forever. Last, and leastly, "Back Of My Hand", a single by a new wave band from Yorkshire called The Jags, entered the charts at No 17. It was a record seemingly composed of off-cuts from Elvis Costello records. And, of greater significance, on March 15, 1979, Costello and The Attractions met the Stephen Stills Band and Bonnie Bramlett in the bar of the Holiday Inn, Columbus, Ohio, and had a drunken argument which, for better or worse, took Elvis Costello's potential career as the British Tom Petty away.

We'll never know what the FM skinny-tie new wave Elvis Costello would have been like if he had stayed with the pop money and made *Armed Forces 2*. Almost certainly, the career moves he did make were for the best. But we still have this, one of the most extraordinary, smart and original pop albums ever made.

TRACKMARKS ARMED FORCES

1. Accidents Will Happen ★★★★
2. Senior Service ★★★
3. Oliver's Army ★★★★★
4. Big Boys ★★★
5. Green Shirt ★★★★
6. Party Girl ★★★★
7. Goon Squad ★★★★
8. Busy Bodies ★★★
9. Sunday's Best ★★★
10. Moods For Moderns ★★★
11. Chemistry Class ★★★
12. Two Little Hitlers ★★★★

Label: Radar
Produced by: Nick Lowe
Recorded at: Eden Studios, London
Personnel: Elvis Costello (guitar, vocals), Steve Nieve (piano, organ, synthesiser), Bruce Thomas (bass), Pete Thomas (drums)
Highest chart position: UK 2; US 10

GET HAPPY!!

Hi, fidelity? Why EC's frantic tribute to Motown and Stax is no laughing matter.

BY JIM WIRTH

RELEASED FEBRUARY 15, 1980

"*HE DRINKS IN self-defence*," Elvis Costello sings on "Temptation", a fair indication of the point his life had reached in the months leading up to *Get Happy!!*. Recorded in October 1979, Costello's uneasily cheery pastiche of Motown and Stax has a lighter tone than its immediate predecessors, with the quirky sleeve's integral ringwear designed to make the package seem like some well-thumbed 1965 Tamla release. However, it is all a cosy blanket covering an uneasy, and occasionally dissolute mess, smart lines sparkling in deep and muddy emotional waters.

"*Trying to be so bad is bad enough*," sings Costello, voice worn ragged on *Get Happy!!*'s wearily defiant closer, "Riot Act". "*Don't make me laugh by talking tough*." Costello's attempts at acting the big man, of course, had led to substantial problems. Goaded to no small extent by tough-guy manager Jake Riviera, who had actively encouraged the siege atmosphere that surrounded the singer as he broke America, Costello was reluctant to be an easy commodity. As he had growled on stand-alone 1978 single "Radio, Radio", a hate-letter to the music business: "*I wanna bite the hand that feeds me/I wanna bite that hand so badly*."

He duly bit off substantially more than he could chew after a show in Columbus, Ohio on March 15, 1979, a drunken spat with members of Stephen Stills' entourage – and particularly Bonnie Bramlett, once of Delaney & Bonnie fame – descended into a fight.

Beset with death threats and a radio black-out, Costello showed contrition at a New York press conference on March 30, 1979. "Nobody said that to make records you've got to have a certificate that says you're a nice and wonderful person," he said, struggling to maintain some dignity. He has been apologising ever since. This in 1982: "I said the most outrageous thing I could possibly say to [*the Stills party*] – that I knew, in my drunken logic, would anger them more than anything else." Then a lifetime later in 2010: "I thought [*I*] was being ironic", and again, "Despite everything else that I've stood for, that's still mentioned."

Many read the affection for soul music expressed on *Get Happy!!* as a musical act of penitence, but the lessons in humility are seemingly more to do with his well-publicised dalliance with November 1974 Playmate Of The Month Bebe Buell, and the uneasy reconciliation with first wife Mary Burgoyne. A 25-year-old father and husband, Costello's discovery – expressed on unflattering third-person pen pic "The Imposter" – that he is "*not the man you'd think that he could be*" is everywhere. A sense of inadequacy underpins *Get Happy!!*, along with the feeling that he has simultaneously underpaid for and been short-changed by love.

Opening pun fiesta "Love For Tender" sullies human emotion with the language of high finance, and finds Costello very much in arrears: "*You can total up the balance sheet, and never know if I'm a counterfeit*," he sings over a chirpy, finger-clicking backdrop. His fakery is further exposed on the uptempo "The Imposter", the protagonist "*Trying to be too bad, trying to talk too tough, trying to jack the lad*". Trying, and notably failing.

Bewitched and utterly bewildered by the "*double duchess*" he encounters in "New Amsterdam", Costello finds his career capital also loses a lot on the foreign exchanges. "*Back in London they'll take you to heart after a while*," he muses. "*Though I look right at home, I still feel like an exile*."

In a world – or indeed a continent – where insincere compliments are seemingly easy to

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"Elvis and The Attractions have pared their sound right down to the bone. There are no solos, no synthesisers, and almost no overdubs... There's a much better rhythm and expression here."
PAUL RAMBALL, NME, FEBRUARY 18, 1980

"Twenty-track avalanches are difficult to absorb – tracks that first seemed weak have now come up smiling, and others may follow..."
CHRIS BRAZIER, MELODY MAKER, FEBRUARY 23, 1980

come by, *Get Happy!!* plunges Costello into a quest for something like truth. "*Everything you say now sounds like it was ghost-written*," he wonders in horror of his paramour on "New Amsterdam". While his idiot "King Horse" alter ego is besotted with the trappings of success ("*So fond of the fabric/So fond of fabrication*"), the newly wise Costello suddenly sees deception everywhere. "*Her bedroom eyes were like a button she was pushing*," he notes of one bedfellow on "Opportunity", while seeing sex through a one-night stand's eyes on "Motel Matches": "*Though your mind is full of love, in your eyes there is a vacancy*."

Inauthentic love is bad enough, but authentic lovelessness is no better. On "Possession", Costello paints a joyless picture of a decaying cupboard-love relationship, seemingly culminating in a last night at home before heading out on tour: "*So I see us lying back to back, my case is closed, my case is packed/I'll get out before the violence, or the tears, or the silence*."

Extra-marital sex, though, does little to warm a cold heart. His voice utterly ravaged on the bed-hopping "High Fidelity" (or should that be 'Hi, Fidelity'?), Costello expresses some hollow-eyed sense of adulterer's remorse ("*Maybe I got above my station/Maybe you're only changing channels*"), but a more selfish disappointment with the essential architecture of romantic relationships is the overriding emotion on *Get Happy!!*. It's all compromised. None of it works. "*Everybody's hiding under covers*," Costello wails as he looks to wipe the slate clean on the under-eulogised "Clowntime Is Over". "*Who's making Lovers' Lane safe again for lovers?*"

Costello unburdens himself of an intercontinental flight's worth of emotional baggage on *Get Happy!!*, but – with 10 songs a side on the original version – fast scene changes cover up for any sameyness in the action, with some unbelievably good material flashing in and out of focus at high speed (the enigmatic "Secondary Modern" is a less-noted career highlight).

It is the album where he abandoned any remaining pretence of being in the musical vanguard, perhaps, but as his 'post-punk Bob Dylan' bubble burst ignominiously, *Get Happy!!* might be the first record where Costello dared to show some vulnerability. No longer so big or so clever, Costello's usual wisecracking fury takes a stylish turn towards a more modest sense of self-awareness. Not necessarily authentic soul music, but music with a genuine soul.

TRACKMARKS GET HAPPY!!

1. Love For Tender ★★★★
2. Opportunity ★★★★
3. The Imposter ★★★
4. Secondary Modern ★★★★★
5. King Horse ★★★★
6. Possession ★★★★
7. Men Called Uncle ★★★★
8. Clowntime Is Over ★★★★
9. New Amsterdam ★★★★★
10. High Fidelity ★★★★★
11. I Can't Stand Up For Falling Down ★★★
12. Black & White World ★★★
13. 5ive Gears In Reverse ★★★
14. B Movie ★★★
15. Motel Matches ★★★
16. Human Touch ★★★
17. Beaten To The Punch ★★★
18. Temptation ★★★
19. I Stand Accused ★★★
20. Riot Act ★★★★★

Label: F-Beat
Produced by: Nick Lowe
Recorded at: Wisseloord Studio, Hilversum, Netherlands and Eden Studios, London
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitar, organ on "Possession", all instruments on "New Amsterdam"), Steve Nieve (piano, organ), Bruce Thomas (bass, harmonica on "I Stand Accused"), Pete Thomas (drums)
Highest chart position: UK 2; US 11

TRUST

Close to collapse, Costello leads The Attractions on an erratic, diverse adventure. Watch your step!

BY BUD SCOPPA

RELEASED JANUARY 23, 1981

ONE MAN'S HODGE-PODGE is another man's 'White Album'. A close examination of *Trust*, a third of a century after its release, indicates that it is neither the awkward misstep some perceived it to be at the time, nor an overlooked masterpiece, as revisionists have pronounced it to be in retrospect. Among the 14 tracks are a handful of subpar songs by Costello's standards, still valuable thanks to the tautness and invention of The Attractions, at the peak of their powers. But *Trust* also contains some of the finest songs Costello has ever written, brought to life by flights of vocal brilliance and jaw-dropping instrumental interaction.

In the fall of 1980, Costello, Nieve, the Thomases and producer Nick Lowe began work on their fourth collaboration, no doubt hoping to add to their streak of instant classics. Once again, the prolific Costello had prepared a bounty of new material, drawing inspiration from the macro (the new, repressive political climate of the Thatcher regime) and the micro (his unravelling marriage), while also cherry-picking bits from a sheaf of notes and partly written pieces the 26-year-old artist had been accumulating since his late adolescence.

Given the pressure they were clearly under to deliver the goods yet again, it seems odd that the principals chose to abandon London's Eden Studios, where they'd made all of their previous magic together, in favor of Dick James' DJM Studios, whose tracking room had a strikingly different sonic character to Eden. It was "drier," "tighter" and "less live", in the parlance of recording engineers, as they soon discovered, and as several tracks contained on the bonus disc of the 2003 Rhino reissue illustrate. The band and Lowe's inability to get the sounds they were going for ramped up their frustration to unprecedented levels and led them back to Eden to cut the bulk of the album.

A stylistic potpourri, *Trust* refuses to stay in one place for long, looking backward one moment and forward the next. "Lovers Walk" and "Strict Time" continue *Get Happy!!*'s R'n'B-derived propulsiveness, and "Different Finger" anticipates the following country set *Almost Blue*, while the ballads "You'll Never Be A Man", "Shot With His Own Gun" and "Big Sister's Clothes" exhibit the baroque intricacy of *Imperial Bedroom*. Less obvious moves, according to their author, involved the nipping of bits from such contemporaries as The Police ("Clubland"), The Pretenders ("Clubland" again) and XTC ("White Knuckles"). Costello, though, may well have been putting us on – apart from the also acknowledged, more readily apparent rub-off from his mates in Squeeze, as evidenced in the Glenn Tilbrook co-starring "From A Whisper To A Scream" and the Chris Difford-like lyrical detail in "Fish'n'Chip Paper". (In 1982, Costello would return the favour, guesting on Squeeze's "Black Coffee In Bed").

While the most illuminating evaluations of Costello's records are Costello's own 2002 notes, which enriched the Rhino reissues, the reader must bear in mind that he frequently sells himself short in the interests of self-mockery and the desire to amuse. Nonetheless, considering the excesses that characterised that wild and woolly era, there's no reason to doubt his oft-quoted description of *Trust* as "easily the most drug-influenced record of my career", or that "It was completed close to a self-induced nervous collapse on a diet of rough 'scrumpy' cider, gin and tonic, various powders, only one of which was 'Andrews Liver Salts', and, in the final hours, Seconal and Johnnie Walker Black Label." In light of this confession, the impish grin on Costello's face on the cover portrait comes off as comically ironic.

Trust, though, has its share of undeniably

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"*Trust* jump-starts single-first like *Get Happy!!* did almost exactly 12 months ago (and like so many Motown LPs did so many times before). 'Clubland' is as appropriate a taster for the new tract as 'I Can't Stand Up (For Falling Down)' was then – a jumble twist of investigative lyricism, tearing strips of wallpaper down off the mythology in question..."
IAN PENMAN, NME, JANUARY 24, 1981

"*Trust* arrives like a flurry of punches, pinning back your ears as it pins you to the ropes; ducking one punch, you walk into another. Some of the individual blows might lack a decisive impact, but the final combination puts you down for the count."
ALLAN JONES, MELODY MAKER, JANUARY 24, 1981

brilliant passages, none better than the tandem of "Watch Your Step" and "New Lace Sleeves". Properly placed alongside each other precisely in the middle of the sequence, the two songs are fraternal twins in several respects. Costello had started them six years earlier when he was 20, prior to *My Aim Is True*, making them the oldest on the LP. The echo-free, close-mic'd vocal sound matches the bone-dry recording, and Nieve's overdubbed, Jamaican-dub-inspired melodica flourishes further integrate their elegant feel. In addition, the two lyrics are embedded with drop-dead-gorgeous turns of phrase, like the delectable near-rhyme "*And you're drinking down the Eau de Cologne/And you're spitting out the Kodachrome*", from "Watch Your Step" and the memorable set-up of "New Lace Sleeves", which Costello croons in blubber-lipped fashion, like a new wave Bing Crosby: "*Bad lovers face to face in the morning/Shy apologies and polite regrets/Slow dances that left no warning of/Outraged glances and indiscreet yawning/Good manners and bad breath get you nowhere.*" That's as good as it gets – a movie in five lines.

What's more, as a showcase for The Attractions, *Trust* has few equals. Among the numerous high points are Pete Thomas' systematic pulverising of his drumkit in the brutally visceral yet perfectly controlled "Lovers Walk"; Bruce Thomas' hyper-melodic, McCartney-esque lead bass on "Clubland", "Strict Time" and throughout; Nieve's eloquent song-serving piano work on "You'll Never Be A Man" and "Shot With His Own Gun". It's the ensemble's raging groove on "From A Whisper To A Scream" that delivers the album's most hair-raising contrast when it erupts on the stately heels of "New Lace Sleeves", with the slashing guitar riffs of The Rumour's Martin Belmont matching Tilbrook and Costello's conjoined vocal urgency.

At the other extreme, The Attractions rescue the throwaways "Luxembourg" and "Fish'n' Chip Paper", seamlessly fusing Sun Records rockabilly and hardcore punk on the former and animating the latter's flatness with their jaunty interplay. By the same token, they give odd-song-out "Different Finger" a reason for inclusion, by expertly impersonating a combo of stone-country Nashville cats.

Trust might not have been relatively undervalued in the canon had it yielded a hit (strangely, "New Lace Sleeves", clearly its standout track, was never released as a single), and it might've been more highly regarded had it been edited down to a compact 11-song set. As released, the album is a mixed bag, but its pleasures are many, its baseline is sturdy and its peaks are towering indeed.

TRACKMARKS TRUST

1. Clubland ★★★★
2. Lovers Walk ★★★★★
3. You'll Never Be A Man ★★★★
4. Pretty Words ★★★★
5. Strict Time ★★★★
6. Luxembourg ★★★
7. Watch Your Step ★★★★★
8. New Lace Sleeves ★★★★★
9. From A Whisper To A Scream ★★★★★
10. Different Finger ★★★
11. White Knuckles ★★★★
12. Shot With His Own Gun ★★★
13. Fish'n'Chip Paper ★★
14. Big Sister's Clothes ★★★

Label: F-Beat
Produced by: Nick Lowe with Roger Bechirian
Recorded at: Eden Studios and DJM Studios, London
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitar, all instruments on "Big Sister's Clothes"), Steve Nieve (piano, organ, melodica), Bruce Thomas (bass), Pete Thomas (drums), Glenn Tilbrook (vocal on "From A Whisper To A Scream"), Martin Belmont (guitar on "From A Whisper To A Scream")
Highest chart position: UK 9; US 28

ALMOST BLUE

"WARNING: This album contains country & western music and may cause offence to narrow-minded listeners." BY ROB HUGHES

RELEASED OCTOBER 23, 1981

IF ELVIS COSTELLO had been toying with the idea of retiring from music prior to *Trust*, its disappointing sales numbers hardly lightened the mood. His marriage was failing, he was drinking too much, and the collective tension within The Attractions showed little sign of easing up.

As a consequence, he chose to take a break from songwriting altogether – though crucially, not from the studio itself. Costello had come to the conclusion that he could better articulate his current state through other people's songs. And what better medium to express his sorry disillusionment than country music?

This was no arbitrary solution to a dilemma. Costello had been a country disciple for most of his life. Hank Williams was part of the repertoire during his folk club days as Declan MacManus, and during the Live Stiffs jaunt of '77, it was suggested that he remove *The Best Of George Jones* from the tourbus for fear of 'confusing' guests from the music press. The same rationale, you suspect, was behind the label's decision to nix the Jones-apeing "Stranger In The House" from *My Aim Is True*. Costello had eventually realised an ambition, though, when he and Gorgeous George cut a duet of the song for the latter's *My Very Special Guests* in 1979.

Seduced by the self-destructive tropes of classic country, Costello opted to go the full mile on his next album. He and The Attractions flew to Nashville and hired Billy Sherrill, famous for his work with Jones, Tammy Wynette and Charlie Rich, as producer. Also in tow was a camera crew from *The South Bank Show*, their interest piqued by the sight of one of Britain's edgier talents making a detour into the distinctly unhip realm of country.

The band were joined by fiddler Tommy Millar and lead guitarist/pedal steel player John McFee at CBS' Studio A, where Costello had shortlisted a bunch of songs previously recorded by the likes of Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, George Jones and Gram Parsons. The latter was a key signpost on what became *Almost Blue*. Costello's initial interest in country had been sparked by the discovery of two Parsons-heavy albums as a teenager: The Byrds' *Sweetheart Of The Rodeo* and The Flying Burrito Brothers' *The Gilded Palace Of Sin*. Both records ached with a peculiar sense of longing, made all the more potent by a soulful voice that seemed to foretell some hopelessly broken future.

Given that Parsons died young, at just 26, the sentiment of these songs now drew Costello in deeper. Two Gram covers made it onto *Almost Blue*. The first, "I'm Your Toy" (aka "Hot Burrito #1"), found Elvis in potent form, crying hurt while his onetime lover sinks into the arms of another. It's a midtempo ballad that more or less sticks to the arrangement of the original, as does the second Parsons co-write, "How Much I Lied", marked by Steve Nieve's rolling piano riff.

Such faithful adherence to source material was a constant puzzle to Sherrill. This clearly wasn't what he was expecting. And while Elvis fans no doubt had similar concerns about the choice of producer (as a pioneer of Nashville's countrypolitan sound, Sherrill was noted for sugaring his work with liberal use of strings), Costello knew what he was aiming for. If the choice of song was right, he argued, there could be a genuine tension between the emotion of the singer and Sherrill's smooth backdrops.

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"Costello and company cut through the layers of smart prejudice to find country music's enduring values; its sly humour, its lyrical craftsmanship, its melancholy dignity... This is the kind of country where a man could build himself a home."

PAUL DU NOYER, NME, OCTOBER 24, 1981

Yet Sherrill couldn't understand why an English ex-punk would want to cut an album of "worn-out" country covers. His barely disguised indifference to the whole thing caused a degree of tension in its own right. Only when Costello and the band ripped through an utterly irreverent version of Hank Williams' "Why Don't You Love Me (Like You Used To Do)?" did the producer get animated at all, double tracking the song for added oomph. Most of the time, though, as Costello recalled later, "it was less of a collaboration and more of a contest in cultural differences". He added: "Anybody who has seen *The South Bank Show* will know Mr Sherrill as an impatient man with an overwhelming interest in speedboats."

Still, over the course of 12 days in Nashville, the band recorded over 25 covers, of which a dozen made it onto the album. It was only fitting that, given Costello's predilection for booze, a pair of drinking songs made the final cut. One of them is an uptempo take on Merle Haggard's "Tonight The Bottle Let Me Down", imbuing the song with a fine dash of R'n'B swing. The other is Charlie Rich's gin-soaked "Sittin' And Thinkin'", which proved a capable vehicle for both Sherrill's backing choir, Nashville Edition, and the weepy drift of McFee's pedal steel.

As if to pre-empt a tough reception, at a time when populist country in the UK meant little more than Kenny Rogers and Crystal Gayle, *Almost Blue*'s cover came with a sardonic sticker: "WARNING: This album contains country & western music and may cause offence to narrow-minded listeners." It fared better than Costello may have expected, however, outselling *Trust* and landing him a first Top 10 hit for 18 months with "A Good Year For The Roses". Written by Jerry Chesnut and originally cut by George Jones, it's a classic break-up ballad that Costello tackles admirably.

Almost Blue certainly isn't perfect, but neither is it the ill-judged genre exercise that some critics, especially in the US, tried to make out. Some reviews were scathing. *The Washington Post* declared it "a mean-spirited mess", while *Creem* dismissed Costello as little more than a "hack lounge singer". Elvis countered by suggesting that Americans resented him for daring to play their music.

At the surface, *Almost Blue* is simply a case of one man tipping the wink to the songs and artists who moved him. But the album also served to resolve something of a crisis of faith in his own songwriting ability, allowing Costello to clear the ground for his next endeavour, the wholly different *Imperial Bedroom*.

TRACKMARKS ALMOST BLUE

1. Why Don't You Love Me (Like You Used To Do)? ★★★
2. Sweet Dreams ★★★
3. Success ★★★
4. I'm Your Toy ★★★★
5. Tonight The Bottle Let Me Down ★★★
6. Brown To Blue ★★★★
7. Good Year For The Roses ★★★★
8. Sittin' And Thinkin' ★★★
9. Colour Of The Blues ★★★★
10. Too Far Gone ★★★
11. Honey Hush ★★★
12. How Much I Lied ★★★★

Label: F-Beat
Produced by: Billy Sherrill
Recorded at: CBS Studio A, Nashville
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitar), Steve Nieve (piano, organ), Bruce Thomas (bass), Pete Thomas (drums), John McFee (lead guitar, pedal steel), Tommy Millar (fiddle), Nashville Edition (backing vocals)
Highest chart position: UK 7; US 50

IMPERIAL BEDROOM

The boy with a problem reaches a kind of maturity. Baroque, Beatlesy, but still uncompromisingly visceral. BY JON DALE

RELEASED JULY 2, 1982

TALK ABOUT GREAT expectations. For their promotional campaign for Elvis Costello & The Attractions' 1982 album *Imperial Bedroom*, Columbia Records advertised the record with a simple tagline: "Masterpiece?" That question mark is the (doubtless unintentionally) telling moment. Critical reception of *Imperial Bedroom* was mixed but mainly positive; its two singles didn't do particularly well, but the public took to the album, sending it Top 10 in the UK. And yet Costello himself would come out, later, criticising the songs, telling *Rolling Stone* in the late '80s, "Some of the songs are just not written well enough", that they often were too "vague" and "theoretical".

It was the first time Costello's own songs had been produced by someone other than Nick Lowe, another step outside the familiar, outside the psychological confines of the Stiff Records clique (Lowe wouldn't return to the Costello producer's chair until 1986's *Blood & Chocolate*). Instead, Costello called in Geoff Emerick, perhaps best known for his engineering work on The Beatles' *Revolver*, *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and "Strawberry Fields Forever". Emerick would also follow through some of Paul McCartney's solo career, including co-production and engineering of *Band On The Run* and *Tug Of War*, which he was engineering concurrently with the *Imperial Bedroom* sessions. In short, Emerick had good form.

Imperial Bedroom was also the first set of original songs that Costello had brought to the studio without road testing them first, which might account for the stylistic leaps that he takes within the album: even, with the dislocations of "Man Out Of Time", within the songs themselves. That song carves its material out of several temporalities, with the beginning and ending dropped in from an earlier, rockier version, recorded on eight-track during demo sessions for the album. Tearing up the song with idiot energy, the feverish drive of the demo "Man Out Of Time", all clanging guitar and raucous screams, was spliced out of the original and cut into the top and tail of the studio recording, Costello says in his liner notes, "to break with the mood of the surrounding tracks".

It's a fair observation – if *Imperial Bedroom* suffers from anything, and it's a minor complaint, it's an occasional longueur, a settling into mood that, rather than helping narrate a coherent story for the album in toto, can have it feeling slightly ponderous. If anything, such an approach could have been better served breaking up other parts of the album. As it is, the escalating fervour of the studio "Man Out Of Time" sits beautifully next to the piercingly gentle "Almost Blue", its jazz-ish modality cut from the same cloth as "Shipbuilding", the song Costello had recently co-written with Clive Langer for Robert Wyatt, but with that song's political edge replaced with interpersonal autopsy. And is that an echo of one of Costello's earlier, best-known songs, in the line, "*there is part of me that's always true, always*"?

Reeling back to the start of the album, "Beyond Belief" shares similar psychological space with "Almost Blue", though Costello's grappling with mortality ("*you'll never be alone in the bone orchard*") and cruelty has a much more tart edge. Here he's also playing with his voice, treating it as yet another piece of sonic material to be cut and pulled, moving into strangely windy, reedy falsetto, leaping into a distortion chamber for emphasis, or towards the end of the song, corralling multiple Costellos as the group recede out of view. "Tears Before Bedtime" follows suit, with Costello leaping between octaves like no-one's business;

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"Like all his records, *Imperial Bedroom* shows a fascination with paradox. This is pop music organised to an incredible sophistication... Costello has finally achieved a synthesis of words and music that correlates to the duplicity of each. Every track leads its double life as a flawless pop song... This is miles ahead."
RICHARD COOK, NME, JULY 3, 1982

"This record, accomplished as it is, has more cleverness than soul, more artifice than art. There's nothing in the shape of the songs to demarcate them from prime Costello of the past, and lyrically he doesn't hit any new bases, skewer any radically new approaches... I expected more."
ADAM SWEETING, MELODY MAKER, JULY 3, 1982

it's a strange, disconnected song, not really telling of the strengths of *Imperial Bedroom*.

From there, though, the album is on the ascendant, moving through the chilling dissections of "Shabby Doll", the thrilling, previously mentioned "Man Out Of Time" (a great example of The Attractions' simpático approach, able to build emotional architectures from their ensemble playing that buttress and bolster Costello's voice and lyrics). By the time of "...And In Every Home", where Costello and Nieve bring in a 40-piece orchestra, it's clear that, with *Imperial Bedroom*, Costello's taking his greatest strides, in terms of arrangement, risking some of the material in the process, but often with great, surprising outcomes.

"...And In Every Home" is a puzzling, but lovely song. While the arrangements contain references to George Martin's work for The Beatles, if anything, Nieve's charts have the same voluptuous, voluminous splendour as Van Dyke Parks' arrangements for his own *Song Cycle* and *Discover America* albums. Like those, there's an almost rococo approach to the orchestration, using the nuance of the orchestra to its greatest, going for playful touches that can suddenly turn, on a dime, to moments of great pathos, like the drone bed that swells as Costello's voice disappears into the silence at the end, repeating the song title.

From there, *Imperial Bedroom* quickly slides through a series of two-minute songs that play out further as an index of possibilities, enjoyable but not quite fully realised – "The Loved Ones", "Human Hands", "Kid About It" – before the album rallies with the heartbreaking "Boy With A Problem", where Costello passes the lyrical baton to Squeeze's Chris Difford. The album's lead single, "You Little Fool", starts to wind the set down, Costello again twisting his vocal performances around the song's rattling spine, some seriously baroque harpsichord touches and ill-advised flanging – well, it was the '80s – serving as dislocating forces, complications, before "Town Cryer" closes the album.

While Costello's said that many of the lyrics for *Imperial Bedroom* played characters, you can't help but hear the lyricist's own psychology in "Town Cryer"'s loser pathology, Costello squeezing "*I'm the town cryer... I'm a little down/ With a lifetime to go*" out of his body, before, towards the very end, sighing about being "*Just a little boy lost in a big man's shirt*". Rallying after a couple of years of performative excess, mutual antagonisms, sideways moves and confusing 180-degree spins, with *Imperial Bedroom*, Costello took stock to figure out where he was headed. It's maturity, in other words, but the real deal, with all of the confusions and agonies of real life bleeding from the songs.

TRACKMARKS IMPERIAL BEDROOM

1. Beyond Belief ★★★
2. Tears Before Bedtime ★★★
3. Shabby Doll ★★★★
4. The Long Honeymoon ★★★
5. Man Out Of Time ★★★★
6. Almost Blue ★★★★
7. ...And In Every Home ★★★★
8. The Loved Ones ★★★
9. Human Hands ★★★
10. Kid About It ★★★
11. Little Savage ★★★
12. Boy With A Problem ★★★★
13. Pidgin English ★★★
14. You Little Fool ★★★
15. Town Cryer ★★★★

Label: F-Beat
Produced by: Geoff Emerick, "from an original idea by Elvis Costello"
Recorded at: AIR Studios, London
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitar, piano), Steve Nieve (piano, organ, harpsichord, accordion, orchestrations, guitar on "Tears Before Bedtime"), Bruce Thomas (bass), Pete Thomas (drums)
Highest chart position: UK 6; US 30

ARCHIVE ♦ 1982 ♦

"I'm not a man of the people. I never tried to be."

After a four-year silence, Elvis Costello returns to do fresh battle with the British press, determined to avoid the ranting intensity of his early interviews. Has a man who claims "Most people in groups are dullards" really mellowed, though? **NEIL SPENCER** perfects his imperial bedside manner... "I don't think of myself as mature. I don't sit round thinking about myself that much."

TAKEN FROM NME 30/10/1982

SOME THINGS YOU never get used to. It should be no surprise by now that our sundry "stars" – those individuals of proven talent, inspiration and success – are as prone to self-doubt and uncertainty as the rest of us mortals. Still, when the individual concerned is Elvis Costello, admissions of fallibility are not the most expected of events.

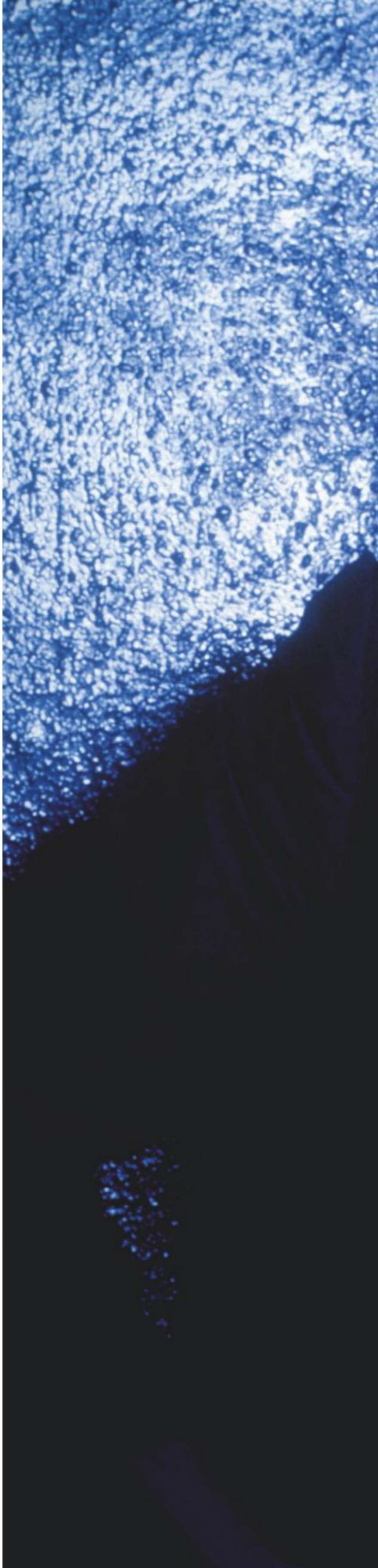
Nor, for that matter, is an Elvis Costello interview. Ever since the prickly EC persona was unleashed onto the world of popular music some five years ago with the resonant strains of "Less Than Zero", the man's maintained an uneasy relationship with the gentlefolk of the press, at best maintaining a rigorous silence, and at worst launching some savage salvos against the critics.

It's now four years since Costello spoke to the British press, his dialogues with *NME*'s Nick Kent being virtually the man's only forays into print, outside of some softcore expeditions in mainstream journals like the *TV Times* and *The Observer* colour supplement. This year, however, Costello has already given *Rolling Stone*'s Greil Marcus an extensive interview, which the increasingly ponderous periodical had front-paged as "ELVIS COSTELLO REPENTS" — somewhat to the chagrin of Costello as it transpires.

"That interview was specially to clear up that incident in Ohio on the Armed Forces tour," he tells me, referring to a barroom run-in with a camp of American musicians fronted by Steven Stills and Bonnie Raitt which had resulted in a slur being attached to Costello's name.

"It coloured our career over there and I wanted to settle that once and for all," Costello says.

No-one in Britain ever entertained such notions about Costello or The Attractions – unthinkable given the man's songs like "Less Than Zero", "Night Rally" or his appearance at a huge Rock Aganst Racism concert – but few doubted that EC was a prickly, unruly talent. No-one wanted to be on the wrong end of his withering sarcasm or dismissive, offhand style of PR. And for his part, Elvis seemed to revel in the role as wayward genius, at times showing something little short of naked contempt for his audience.



ESTATE OF KEITH MORRIS/REDFERNS

Outtake from the *Almost Blue* cover session, 1981

A lot has changed in the three years since what Costello now refers to as his "*Armed Forces* period". Onstage, on record, and on his occasional radio broadcasts, the Costello we've witnessed has been a more measured, more humble, more appealing type of fellow, while his meteoric ascendancy has been likewise arrested, his records noticeably less dominant in the charts and hearts of the nation. "We were left with a warehouse full of *Get Happy!!*," he says with disarming frankness about his follow-up to the phenomenal success of *Armed Forces*. The uneven *Trust* and *Almost Blue*, his country and western album, likewise made little impression on a music scene that was rapidly fragmenting into a new and as yet undetermined pattern.

All of which made the arrival of *Imperial Bedroom* earlier this year particularly impressive, a superb collection of crafted, thoughtful and provocative songs that was both a return to the superlative form of *My Aim Is True* and *This Year's Model* (this critic always finding *Armed Forces* something of a conceit), and an advance into new areas of composition and production.

One of the album's stand-outs was "Man Out Of Time", a song which Elvis says is "about unemployment – and the person unemployed is me". He talks of "dislocation" and "being out of control" in reference to his unruly, awkward period, and exhibits a charm, honesty and humour for which none of his records had quite prepared me; his intelligence, wit and verbal dexterity have always shone through his songs.

WE MEET IN the offices of Warner Brothers Records, a location not without its ironies considering Costello's long-running distrust of, and battles with, the music business. He's pert and fit, conspicuously trimmer than the overweight "baggy suit" period of 12 months back. He's wearing a black leather jacket, a silver and black silk scarf, a grey straw porkpie hat ("got it in New York, made the taxi stop when I saw it in a shop window"), black slacks, white socks and black Doc Marten shoes.

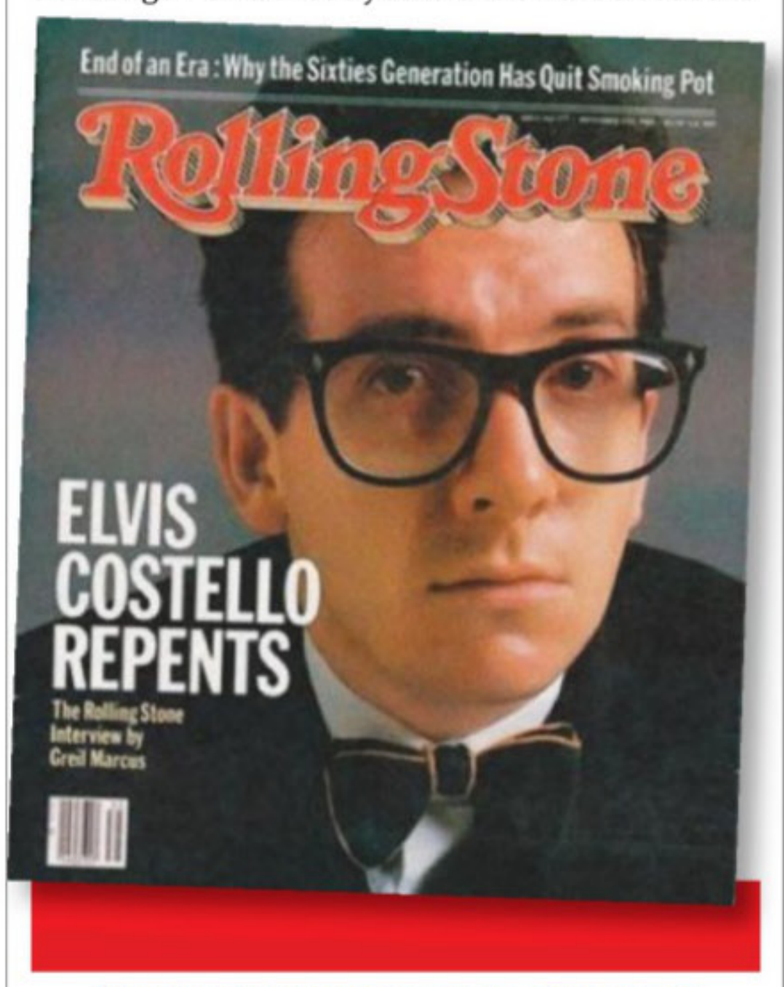
The three-hour conversation traverses his whole career and a lot besides. He rarely shows any reticence and never seems happier than when music is under discussion – the breadth and familiarity of the man's knowledge of contemporary music is quite startling – and will mention Frank Sinatra, Bobby Darin and Kevin Rowland in the same sentence whether it's Dexys or Julie London that's under discussion. In short, he is a consummate fan of music as well as one of its most subtle and skilful exponents.

Apart from the success of *Imperial Bedroom* he currently has, with producer Clive Langer, half the writing credits on one of the year's outstanding records, Robert Wyatt's "Shipbuilding", an oblique and telling response to 1982's militaristic tide, so aptly wrapped in one of Stanley Spencer's wartime paintings of the Glasgow shipyards.

He's also increasingly involved in production – having recently worked with Scottish popsters The Bluebells – and seems proud of his other production work with the likes of Australia's Mental As Anything, and further back, on The Specials' debut LP. He's also at work on the title tune of a forthcoming film, though which film he's disinclined to reveal – "It's the most unlikely title, though." What he'll do next seems particularly uncertain. *Imperial Bedroom* marks the end of the second phase of his recording career, he informs me, and with even his stage name under reconsideration, Costello's next move remains open to even more speculation than usual.

A FEW YEARS AGO, it seemed people were turning to Elvis Costello songs to cover – George Jones and Linda Ronstadt, say; but that doesn't seem to have continued. Are you disappointed your songs haven't been covered more?

No, I don't think that's true. There never were many covers – I always thought I could have had more. I could never understand the A&R men's lack of imagination in not picking up on some of the songs – and those you mention are about the extent of it. But this year there's been a Kiki Dee, a Shaking Pyramids and a Dusty Springfield version of "Just A Memory" – and that's just one song this year, more than I ever got before.



"THE MUSIC BUSINESS HAS GOT LIKE CONTROLLED CORRUPTION, THE WHOLE THING IS SICKENING"
ELVIS COSTELLO

Who would you like to see cover your songs?

The two I'd like to start with first in case they stopped recording is Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald; I'd like to hear either of them sing "Almost Blue"... er... Aretha Franklin, Randy Crawford... I dunno. I'll write for anybody. I don't sit round being precious about it.

I've got this hack mentality on the other side from the one I take very seriously. I wrote these three songs for Frida's [*of Abba*] album, and they turned 'em all down. When I heard about the combination of Phil Collins and Frida, I assumed she was trying to make something less poppy, something meant to be taken more seriously. What you forget is that Phil Collins has moved in more to the centre; his records maybe appeal to people who like the more serious side of Abba, not the "Fernando" end of it. Actually I sent them two songs, the third was the "Imperial Bedroom" that appears on the 12-inch of "Man Out Of Time". I thought it would be funny if they put the title of my new album on their record; I was trying to slip one under the wire there, but it didn't work out.

Do you consciously relate to the tradition of songwriting represented by people like Bacharach/David, Brecht/Weill, George Gershwin and the like?

I'd like to, yeah. Sometimes I throw off a thing that might put me more in mind of a record I heard last week. I don't sit round thinking, 'Oh God, I gotta be like George Gershwin all the time.' That'd be a hell of a weight.

I don't suppose George Gershwin worried about being George Gershwin.

No, that's probably what made him great.

How do you write, in fact? Is there a particular place or method you use to get a song out of yourself?

I only wish there was some way. Not that I wish I wrote more songs – I write loads – but sometimes it's frustrating 'cos it comes when you least expect or want it, when you're trying to sleep, or walking down the street. I'll hear the most arresting idea in my head and I think, 'Oh no, here we go.'

So there are lots of things scribbled on the back of envelopes?

Yeah, sometimes I sit down deliberately to write, but I've never written many good things like that. Sometimes I go through old notebooks and a great line will leap out and I'll try and use it, work it in. I used to write a lot on the road, but there's only so many songs you can write in that situation without getting into actually writing about being on the road, which I dread.

I wrote one very simple song on this last tour, which we learnt straight away and performed called "Every Day I Write The Book", and that went really well, so maybe that's sometimes the way to write a song – finish it in half an hour, learn it in half an hour and do it. We did a lot of songs like that at first, but I wasn't thinking enough about the quality. Now I've decided that half the repertoire of the next set is maybe gonna be stuff off the top of my head.

How many songs have you written?

Ever? I've no idea. There were lots before the first album, some of which turned up late like "New Lace Sleeves" and "Watch Your Step". I looked at them again and decided they were all right, whereas before, they'd seemed a bit vague.

There's a current revival of interest in the "classic" song; the era of Billie Holiday and

the like. Do you think that the art of songwriting is looking up, or is it in decline?
That interest is healthy so long as it's not insubstantial; so long as it's not a passing fad that's gonna cream off the superficial aspects. What disturbed me was when 2-Tone happened and there was the phoney mod revival thing, there were scores of soul reissues and I thought, great, this is going to re-establish that style as part of the vocabulary. Not so much so we could sit round and dig up Motown records, but there had been this indifferent wave that came out of punk that didn't show any emotion and the soul revival really augured well. It left the way open for us to make *Get Happy!!*, which was a much more direct, feeling kind of record.

Then I was disappointed it was never followed through, it never happened. The clothes survived, and a certain amount of good records were made, but a lot of it was just The Lambrettas doing "Poison Ivy". I feel the same thing might be happening again, when it's all just down to copping an attitude in *The Face*. It might be entertaining and pass the time, but it's not really gonna save the song, which will still decline. There are still the people who put the work in. I think Martin Fry is a good songwriter; I like Green from Scritti Politti, as well; I like a lot of recent records, but not all of them have got very substantial songs on. When I heard "Only You" by Yazoo I thought, what a great song, you can play it on acoustic guitar, you can play it with an orchestra. I was kind of disappointed when I got the album that there was nothing good on it, but maybe the next record.

ONE OF THE proclamations of the so-called new wave was that singles wouldn't just be pulled from LPs. You've stuck to that attitude more than most, at least as regards B-sides.
Well, we do still lift singles from LPs, but I'm a big fan of B-sides... If I was pushed to put together a Best Of – not that anyone would want to buy it – I'd want "Big Tears" on it from the B-side of "Pump It Up"; I think it's one of the best things we've made. People say, what the hell is this going on the B-side for? – we've done it time and time again. In a company like this, there's a certain amount of stuff that's got to go along with them and you've got to do what you want, as well. There's a few examples of things being released abroad and then filtered in: that whole Polydor business; I don't understand that at all, why it's done or anything. There's a lot of mysteries about the music business that I still don't understand. We just carry on ahead. I like to put out good B-sides, a couple of tracks on the 12-inchers, tracks that don't fit on albums and I want them out somehow. I just like to make life more interesting.

I figure if people buy our album and then buy a single already on the album, then they're buying it for the B-side, which I usually try and make as good as the A-side; it just doesn't fit in elsewhere.

That was part of the idea of the *Ten Bloody Marys*... tape?
It was a companion to the American version, the *Taking Liberties* album, which was to kill the collector mentality. There were these shops in Greenwich Village selling import singles for $30 and people would buy them. Now, I'm a vinyl junkie but not to the point where I have to have it with that different colour sleeve. I don't care what the label looks like, it's what's in the wax. Also those tracks weren't available to people who didn't live in Greenwich Village, who lived in maybe Ohio and were interested in our records.

Do you still feel as disgusted by the music business as you used to?
Yeah, I do. What I find really amusing at the moment is this "Home Taping Is Killing Music" campaign. Bad music is killing music, or lack of imagination is killing it. Whether you give the bloody records away in the street has nothing to do with it. People are always making excuses for the massive waste of money. The situation where companies have to hype – and if you don't, you get pushed right out the picture – has got completely out of hand. You can't call a truce because nobody will agree to it – there's gonna be somebody else doing it. It's got like controlled corruption, the whole thing is sickening. [*Shaking his head*] I can't think about it; if I did, I couldn't operate at all.

Don't you worry about people taping your albums and singles?
It's never occurred to me as being that serious. I wouldn't have one of those signs on my records. I think it's a blind alley; they kick up a fuss to distract people from other shortcomings and failings.

So do you think the business is failing to promote a lot of good music?
Yeah, including mine. [*Laughs*] I try to avoid reading *Billboard* and the like. I'll read it if it's on the desk there... [*Points and picks up a trade paper*] Look at this fucking thing here, what's that about? I mean, EMI, not only do they have that insulting campaign going round – "Do you realise it's 20 years since Paul McCartney was in The

A good year for the rose-tinted shades: Costello live in New York, 1982

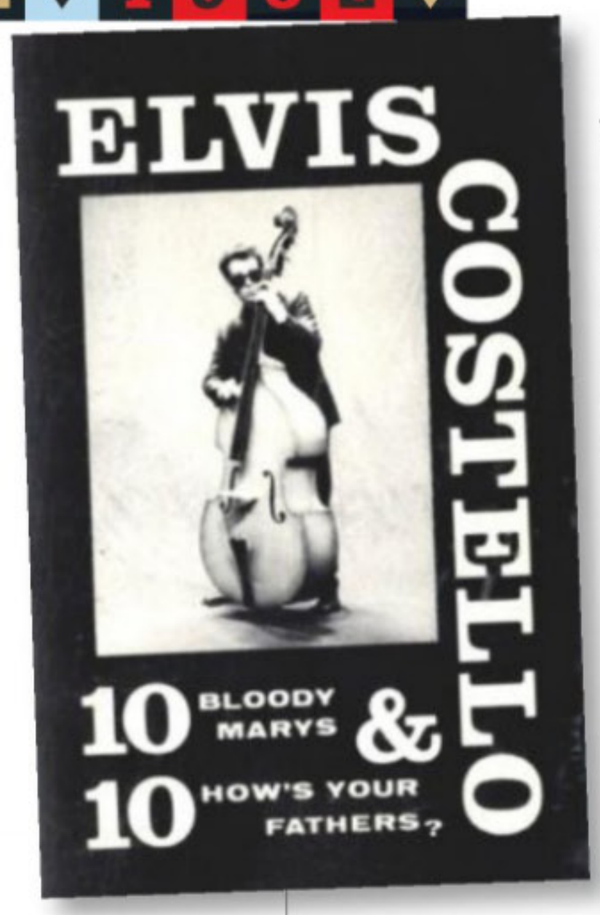
MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

Beatles?" – now we've got to put up with this bloody nonsense, *The John Lennon Collection*. It's just a complete accident that it's coming out in November, just before Christmas. It just makes you feel sick.

Would you say that the real artistry and value of music is being devalued by the behaviour of the record companies?
I don't think that all that many people who are very interesting regard themselves all that artistically in this business. Most of the people I meet are generally just doing a job, and it's usually the people who haven't got much to say who are trying to make it look artistic. The record companies like to play up that artistic bit so they can pull that stuff about. You get on with the art and we'll get on with the business, and hold that over you. Most of the people I've met, apart from a few who are naïve, are not stupid at all, they know what's going on, they get on with their job, they make records, they don't sit round in garrets and fret. I've never understood that. The press are a bit responsible too because they build up a mystique, a romantic image of these sensitive characters that are put upon by the record business.

You've always had a profound mistrust of journalists...
Yeah, I have, from bad experience. There are people for whom I have some respect – I think they know who they are – but that doesn't mean you have to do an interview about every single thing you do, because I really don't think it's all that interesting. There really isn't that much to talk about. Most people in groups are dullards, anyway. The best thing they can do is make records. There are not that many hidden meanings in my songs that I have to sit down and do an interview to explain them, 'cos I'd feel the songs have failed if they don't speak for themselves. There may be oblique things in there that I put in and I still wouldn't choose to explain them; they're set in there to work on the imagination of the listener, or work on my imagination when I sing 'em again.

How do you feel about the early albums now?
I feel that the first three albums are in a group, and then it goes into another gear as it were – not necessarily better than the first three, but a different person made those records. Then the next four records are a group, and then that period ends. Not that the first three are a trilogy, God forbid, but it got more serious in some ways, more emotional, more committed post-*Armed Forces*. I was just a clever-dick up until then. I didn't know anything from anything when I made the first album. I didn't even know if the record I was making was going to come out – Stiff only existed from week to week. The second record we were in making before we knew where we were. By the third one, I thought I was God's gift, y'know? I don't think I was that cocky at the time, but we totally thought we were kings of the castle. Whether or not we were, while making it I was completely convinced; I had no doubts.



The doubts didn't settle in until after that album. Because of appearing like an idiot, like a clown at that particular time, at the end of the Armed Forces tour of America, we came back to England and I decided, "That's it! I've got to get a grip. There's something wrong. The mission's gone wrong somewhere." I didn't like the feeling; I felt completely out of touch with what we were supposed to be doing. By the end of the *Armed Forces* period I felt completely disillusioned with the whole idea of making records.

I remember as early as the British 'Forces' tour – before America, which is where things really got hairy – having a conversation with Bruce Thomas and saying, "Look, I don't think I really want to do this any more." And he said, "You've got to think about it more positively; you're just being defeatist about it." And he talked me into it. He said, "You can't just leave it to The Boomtown Rats; you've got to put up a bit more of a fight than that." [*Laughs*] I was right about it in the long run, that I was disconnected from my original intention. Up until then I thought I was bulletproof. When I realised I wasn't, I made different records from then on. There was more... self-criticism, I suppose. That doesn't mean you become introspective, because you still throw ideas out to other people. You couldn't be totally introspective and make records; you could, you could make very dull records [*laughs*], but...

"GET HAPPY!! – THAT WAS A VERY EMOTIONAL RECORD TO MAKE. VERY EDGY, LOTS OF DRINKING"
ELVIS COSTELLO

The songs became more vulnerable?
More vulnerable, more questioning. Instead of just saying I can rhyme any word with any word... Well, it's a bit glib to look at it like that now because obviously I had more heart in those songs at the time, and I think there were good things on *Armed Forces*, but somewhere along the way it got lost. And it didn't come back until we were actually in the studio making *Get Happy!!*. That was a very emotional record to make. Very edgy, lots of drinking.

Were you disappointed by the reception of *Get Happy!!* and *Trust*?
Erm... I figure that's when things started to go wrong for us in this country in a business sense. I don't think we ever recovered from the court case – when we tried to leave Warner Brothers; whether or not it's been a conscious decision, I wouldn't like to judge the present hierarchy of this company on the previous one, which I had no respect for whatsoever. But I think we've paid dearly for that dispute. You've got to account for a certain loss of your status and chart placings in changes in fashion. We were the new thing in 1978 and obviously by 1980 there were lots of other things coming along. I'm thinking about the time we were a *Top Of The Pops* kind of group, like Blondie or something.

Also, the kind of records we made, we didn't follow up our big commercial success: *Armed Forces* sold 500,000 copies, we had a gold single with "Oliver's Army". If we were to just make another record like that, then we would have followed a formula and those people who liked only that about us, who didn't even know about the first two albums, would have followed on. So I couldn't be disappointed by the comparative commercial failure of *Get Happy!!* and *Trust*, because I wilfully made those records like they were. *Trust* maybe I was a bit more disappointed with, in retrospect, because I think there's more bogus stuff on that than *Get Happy!!*.

We lost the idea of the production halfway through. We set out to make a really simple record with no overdubs without having an overriding style like *Get Happy!!*. We were trying to do the same thing as we did on *Imperial Bedroom*, by taking each song individually, but the production was so low-key it was almost non-existent. Only the very best songs survived it. The weaker songs were just like a jolly-up. Even "Whisper To A Scream", although I had enjoyed it and Glenn [Tilbrook] sang great, it still rang hollow.

Was *Almost Blue* something you had long wanted to do, a bona fide country album in Nashville? Because you had that spell in a country and western group before you became Elvis Costello?
No, not really. That's one of the things that got

"We were the new thing in 1978": performing "Oliver's Army" on *The Kenny Everett Television Show*

added to the biography. The groups I played in were only country by virtue of using acoustic guitars and playing some country numbers in the usual mix of rock'n'roll, and what have you. I picked up on those writers like Merle Haggard and singers like George Jones the same way a lot of people did, filtering back through The Byrds and Burritos. Suddenly a whole world opened up, 'cos we didn't have country as a tradition like they do; which is maybe why they can suffer Barbara Mandrell! – Ernest Tubb and the rest of the original Honky Tonk singers and traditional stylists aren't held in such esteem as they are by the English country and western crowd. It's mainstream MOR now, not what I call *real* country. My original plan was to do an album of ballads, of covers. I had this idea to do a sad album, 'cos one of my favourite albums is *Only The Lonely* by Frank Sinatra, all sad songs. I was even going to do a couple of Sinatra things if I could arrange them right. I had no idea if I had the voice to do it. I thought I did; no-one believed I did 'cos I screeched over a load of guitar things. Then I changed my mind. I thought it would seem like a Bobby Darin album – where he'd do really weird albums, one week a folk singer, the next he'd appear in a tuxedo, each album with a different mood but no real point... they'd be aimless. So I thought we'd do a country album; then it would have a definite style and people would either love it or hate it. And a side effect might be that people who didn't like country music might hear these songs coming from us. When we went to do it, Billy Sherrill couldn't understand why we wanted to do these songs, they were all so old-hat to him. I went there in a very depressed frame of mind anyway. I had this sad feeling, I dunno why, it wasn't anything specific in my life, I'd just wound myself up to it.

I suppose the records from *Get Happy!!* to *Imperial Bedroom* are linked in a way that they're some form of exorcism, post-the disasters of '79. Looking back now, I can't imagine how I was so miserable-sounding. It was a genuine feeling, so I never accepted the criticisms that the singing wasn't authentic.

Was it badly received in the States?

Critically it was 50/50. Some people thought we were incredibly brave and out of our minds, the rest thought it was complete rubbish. Hardly anyone thought it was a good idea.

And the country audience, how did they react to it?

In America, zero. Nashville didn't do a single thing to promote it. I've heard vague reports that it got played on a couple of obscure country stations, but I guess they thought it was too weird that an English group at all would do that, let alone an English "new waver". Country and western stations, they probably think I'm a punk still; they're that far behind with the press releases – when you imagine that the American record company don't know what we do, really.

What was the experience of Nashville like?

It was only eight days. It rushed by, really. The fact that we were filming it meant it was all really on edge... probably assisted it, really – when I saw the indifference of Billy Sherrill on film... I wasn't aware of it at the time, I was too busy concentrating.

They got a good sound, you can't argue with the sound they got; it's the same sound for George Jones or Tammy Wynette. Sherrill's not interested in 90 per cent of the records he makes, he mixes half of them from his office... he's got an intercom.

There were some bizarre reports about him on his yacht producing from there...

Oh, he's an odd character. He doesn't seem to have a lot of love for anything, really, least of all music. God knows why he's in it. It seems to be a habit; he can't get out of making million-selling records.

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FROM *NME*'s "REVENGE AND GUILT" headlines of '78 to *Rolling Stone*'s "ELVIS COSTELLO REPENTS" a few weeks back, how does it feel to live in block capitals?
I think both headlines are misplaced and irrelevant. I obviously did various things to assist that "revenge and guilt" image, but I found it frustrating early on. I never really revelled in it, though sometimes I added fuel to the fire by foolish things I said. And the "repents" thing – well, that's some sub-editor's idea. That's not even Greil Marcus' idea. I spoke to him afterwards and he was actually angry about that. The tone of the interview was nothing to do with repentance and the inner headline – "explains himself" – was much more what I intended that article to be, clearing up specifically that Ohio incident, which in America was much more crucial to our career; it coloured our career. I felt it important to clear that up once and for all.

In 1978 you told *NME*, "This job is not designed to make you nicer or more mature." How do you feel about that now? Do you think you've become more mature?
Not really. I don't think of myself as mature. I don't sit round thinking about myself that much. I have no opinion about that. I don't know whether I'm more mature; I try to be, about things that are important to me, but I don't necessarily disagree with that quote.

But something snapped you out of that ranting, rub-'em-up-the-wrong-way phase you've described.
I just got tired of it, it's only fun for so long. Also you become a bit pathetic after a while if you're still ranting on. You can only hit people with rage when they're not expecting it, otherwise they just switch off. You've no divine right to their attention. To hold their attention you've got to be a bit more cunning. You've even got to get them to like you. Maybe later you decide to rub 'em up the wrong way again. I'm not saying that would never happen. If I wanted to make a very aggressive record I wouldn't feel inhibited about it as long as I felt it. It was then that the attitude started to dictate to the music and not the other way round; that's when I got disturbed. When I found what I was saying was making better copy than what I was singing, I thought, well, hang on, I gotta be a bit more... not deceitful, but careful and cunning about it.

Do you think it's taken a long time for you to get over that image of negativity?
I'd like to replace it with something that was as powerful but more positive. At the moment we're in an interim period where there are a degree of people who understand what we're about and pay attention, and they number around 50,000 in this country.

Do you have a strong sense of personal history?
[*Thinks*] Not like The Clash [*laughs*]. I don't have a strong sense of personal mythology, if that's what you mean. I suppose you qualify everything with hindsight: I go right off records and individual songs, but beyond my work, no, I don't. It's one of the vanities of the business, and bands who play up to that are usually the ones with least to say. When you get up close to people, it's hard to dislike them, with a few exceptions... like Miles Copeland... [*Whispers*] I hate him.

What's the most dangerous thing you've encountered in your profession?
Dangerous in what sense? Losing control of yourself, losing sight of your original objectives, allowing your bloody image to dictate to your personal life – that's dangerous.

Do you ever feel a little schizoid – like, who is this person called Elvis Costello I've created?
Yeah. I've seriously thought about dumping it. Recently I've come to thinking that for this country anyway. I think there's two different

"THE ATTRACTIONS ALWAYS GET A ROUGH DEAL... THEY AREN'T GIVEN ENOUGH CREDIT FOR BEING SUPERB MUSICIANS"
ELVIS COSTELLO

time-scales: there's America, where it takes you five years for them to wake up long enough so you can sing to them. Here it's kind of 'Oh God, it's old-hat'; that very snobbish attitude. We went down the Haçienda in Manchester and there were all these people sitting round looking like they should have been in Echo And The Bunnymen very obviously sneering, like, "Oh, you're rockist." [*Laughs*] It was that attitude personified.

Would you ever stop performing?
If we stick around much longer we'll be the only group left from our particular vintage still going. I'd only stop if I felt there were no real point. There are no other people who do what we do. There are a lot of other groups that are popular. We're a one-off; not many groups are formed like that. I'm the odd man out... I'm the least accomplished musician. I always feel that The Attractions get a rough deal, that they aren't given enough credit for being superb musicians.

THERE SEEMS TO have been a move away from songs written in the first person on *Imperial Bedroom* to songs written in the third person, with more distance, on things like "The Long Honeymoon" and "And In Every Home".
In some cases, it's storytelling. Other songs it's using more songwriting craft rather than just pouring out your own experience carelessly hacked into some sort of metre and set to a tune. You're using more songwriter's craft to make life more interesting for the listener. I had this horrible feeling, even though I didn't write all the songs on *Almost Blue*, of this man tortured by his own soul, wailing away in an abyss... That's to be flip and play devil's advocate with your own work, which it's always good to do... I could be more ruthless than all your cynical critics about all my records... it doesn't mean I'd write that way for the next record; it's just what I did with those particular subjects.

I couldn't imagine you writing a song as compassionate as "You Little Fool" a few years ago.
There aren't many songs written from that point of view, slightly disparaging but also sympathetic. Maybe it only seems unusual because I was branded as a misogynist around the time of *This Year's Model*, which I thought was completely wrong. A completely mysterious thing to deduce from that album, because the main song, the title track, was saying "Don't just be another face", and that applies to men and women, so I always thought there was compassion there. Maybe the overall tone of the album overpowered some of the intentions of the lyrics, or I was singing them as if I wanted to murder somebody. "You Little Fool" was deliberately meant to sound archaic, with a harpsichord and 12-string guitar, this phoney kind of... I wanted it to sound like *Vanity Fair* or The Left Banke or someone.

The whole LP seems more compassionate, not feeling sorry for yourself but for people caught up in situations over which they have very little control, or which they don't understand.
Maybe. The real horrors were all on *Get Happy!!* or *Almost Blue*, that's when the real black moods were. There was some kind of light on *Trust*... I actually thought ...*Bedroom* was a light-hearted record myself. "Man Out Of Time" is a pretty grim song, and the bridge of "And In Every Home", 'cos it's a song about being unemployed and the person who's unemployed is ME. The bridge at least, I felt, I don't have any purpose, I don't have a job, I'm disconnected...

What?
I still do feel that way a little bit.

You mean not clocking on?
No, the fact that we make the records and people

On the '79 US tour: (l-r) Pete Thomas, Steve Nieve, Elvis Costello, Bruce Thomas

buy them and appreciate them, and the work that's gone into them, but at the same time, the loss of greater interest in them... this is getting to the point of Graham Smith's live review in *NME*: What is going on? How can they be this good and not sell any records? Which seems to be a very fashionable thing to say in all the papers; it's become the fashionable thing to say. It's something I'd like to arrest. As I said before, I've thought of hanging up the name, or doing something drastic like recording under a pseudonym, 'cos I'm actually beginning to think that the name is a jinx. I'm actually starting to get superstitious about it because I think, well, what more is there I can do? I don't want to put any more in because I don't want to be one of those people like Pete Hammill who's tearing his own head off in private.

WHY DO YOU have such a problem getting airplay?

You can't even pinpoint that – we had great airplay on both "Little Fool" and "Head To Toe". I think we have got a problem politically with this company, something that stems from a previous time; it's not the responsibility of the people now, I think they're trying to deal with it. But I do think that reflects our bad relationship between the end of Radar and the start of F-Beat.

F-Beat's never really developed consequently into what I wanted it to be, it's been a disappointment. I wanted it to be a much more important label. I thought it had the ability to be a 2-Tone, to change things. It's been just another sticker on the bloody record, even though it is nice to have control over sleeves and adverts and all the things that people signed to big companies have to put up with. I've got off the point, I was saying something about "Man Out Of Time"... it was about that feeling of not having a job, of making these records aimlessly, might as well be Kevin Coyne or something, really.

It's very difficult to balance the two things, because on the one hand you make serious records, but on the other, you've got to be in competition with Haircut 100. Doesn't mean I'm gonna start wearing leggings or silly yachting caps or act like I'm 18, because that would be embarrassing. But it's important that the next record – if there is a next record, and at the moment I'm weighing up what the next record should be or whether there should be a pause of some kind. 'Cos on the one hand I'm just a song-writer who sings and does my best and puts my heart into it; on the other hand, I understand the business better than a lot of people I know, where I stand in it. And that side of me says, hang on, what is the point of bashing your head against a brick wall, to throw it away, because you're gonna put all this work in and people are not going to accept it because of who you are? They've decided they don't like you, so you might as well not bother to make records and be off like John The Baptist. It's a question of presenting it, the production, the kind of song even...

Maybe you're expecting a lot from the pop song. Maybe you're too smart to be involved in an area as dumb as pop music.

No, I can write dumb lyrics like anybody else.

Were you shocked by the success of "Oliver's Army", considering its subject matter?

No, not really. It was what I always hoped I could do; it's what I hoped to do from the very first single. I didn't choose "Less Than Zero", but we would never have released it if we didn't think there was a chance of pulling that stunt of having a hit record where the musical content took it into the charts before anyone realised what the lyrics were about.

Nick Lowe's theory of "Subversive Pop"?...

Yeah. The minute you say it's subversive it defeats the object. We're gonna release a really subversive single, folks, are you ready there at the radio? [*Laughs*] That's what happened with "Radio Radio". Radio 1 realised it was anti-

ESTATE OF KEITH MORRIS/REDFERNS

radio and not pro-radio when they listened to the verse lyrics instead of just the chorus, radio play stopped overnight and the record dropped like a stone. It was steaming away up until then.

They'll play anything with "radio" in the title.
They even use it as a jingle sometimes, edited down. I don't hold any animosity – I don't really think there are any evil minds at work in British radio; I think there's a lot of under-achievements. But I do think there's a conscious... almost a conspiracy, in America. It's much more sinister. The American radio by comparison is really sinister. They've got to the point now where they won't play new records. They'll play old records because they know they hold the listener, and the sponsor wants that.

ALTHOUGH IT WAS written two or three years ago, "Oliver's Army" is about the only record that seems to have any relevance to the Falklands conflict.
Hmmm. That's why when I was going round the radio stations on this last tour I tended to plug Robert Wyatt's record ("Shipbuilding") more than my own, because I had more concern, really, in the fate of that. I'm really proud of that record, both from writing it and being involved in it. It was great to work with Robert because he's such a great singer, and he's also one of the nicest people I've ever worked with. He was unbelievable to work with. I hate to sound mawkish, but I actually got choked up listening to him. I forgot I was supposed to be producing it. I did the final vocal mix because Clive was away. I just got completely overcome in one take, I couldn't listen to his voice, it's so plaintive. I'd written the lyrics and I was meant to be taking responsibility for it. Clive had done all the work getting the track right, and it was all complete.

How did you come to write it?
During our Australian tour we were getting the Australian version of the Falklands thing. The Australian coverage was really gruesome, going on about napalm and everything; they were really dramatising it. We weren't getting quite so much of the patriotic bollocks you were getting here, it wasn't quite so sickening as the *Daily Star*, "Sponsor Your Own Exocet Missile" and those really sickly things. They say that you see your own country more clearly when you're away from it.

Reading these two-day-old reports, the strangest things flashed in my mind... It was a pretty funny feeling singing that song in Glasgow and Newcastle on the tour; I wondered how many people had heard it or knew what it was about, whether it's clear enough to hear the lyrics? And this guy came round, and he actually worked in the shipyards and liked the song. He said, it's right, y'know? Why have we got our jobs back? I was trying to think from the point of view of a father, because the kid's quite young, or so he thinks until the kid's joined up, then the kid's gone away on a ship that he's built. He got his job back, he got his way of life back, only to send his own child to go and get killed. It's like that song "Two Brothers" about the American Civil War; just a simple war ballad in that tradition.

The original idea was like a Brill Building songwriting idea, a technical exercise between me and Clive. The tune moved me a lot. Clive had written it with Robert in mind. He'd got in touch with Rough Trade but my involvement wasn't mentioned. I always had the feeling that if my name had been mentioned he might back off, because of what I said about people having this suspicion of me. All those people who treat everything I do with suspicion, they might say, "Oh here he comes, clever dick." I don't think they could hear Robert's voice and think it doesn't sound sincere. He's the only person I can imagine singing "The Red Flag" and making it into a beautiful song.

How about Chet Baker's "Memories Of You" on the flip side?
I said to Robert in the studio that one of my favourite singers was Chet Baker. It turned out that he was his wife's favourite, and that she'd always tried to get him to do something in that vein, so...

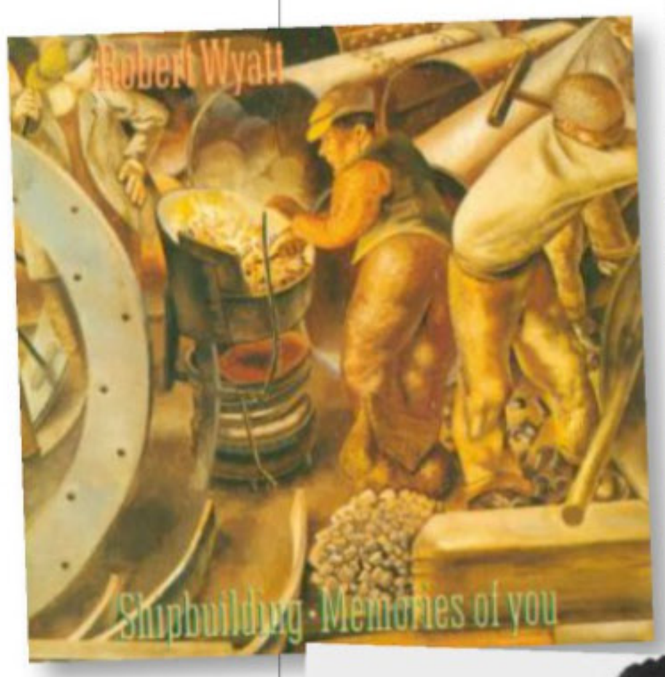
I was going to ask you about whether you'd backed away from political songs, but that about answers it.
[*Laughs*] I see "And In Every Home" as a political song. It was me writing a song which expressed my own disconnection with the direct communication that, say,

In the studio with Chet Baker, recording Costello's version of "Shipbuilding", 1983

"Shipbuilding" singer Robert Wyatt: "So plaintive..."

KEITH MORRIS/REDFERNS; NICK ROGERS/DAILY MAIL/REX

Paul Weller or Ali Campbell have with their audience. Those people can stand up and sing, "We do this, we do that", some anthemic things, like "When You're Young". For all they get knocked – like people say they're the reggae Joan Baez – I think UB40 are fantastic: the guy's voice; they can sing "One In Ten" and it's not self-conscious. If I wrote that song I'd be rightly ridiculed for it. I've never established a relationship with the audience like that. I'm not a man of the people. I never tried to be. I just write songs. I never identified with any class thing.



I love The Beat's new record, but it seems they're caught in a trap because everyone's saying, why isn't this about politics? But I think "I Confess" is one of the most beautiful bits of singing I've heard all year.

So, "And In Every Home" was trying to write a story about hard times, but also relating the song to my own feelings about being on the scrap heap. I identified that your personal pride can be more important than the job itself. I can only comment from the outside, but not from my mansion on the hill. I just live in an ordinary house. Oh, I've made money, but I'm not consciously extravagant. Whenever it's got out of hand, I've always found disgust with myself. That song incorporates some of my dilemmas about political writing and perhaps the limitations I think Dave Wakeling is finding these days. Same with Paul Weller; because he wrote "Bitterest Pill" people are critical. What's the matter with everyone? That's a great song. So long as the songs are about people, I think that's what is important.

I TELL ELVIS about a literary critic who fed all Shakespeare's plays into a computer in order to analyse the imagery, and what specific images "meant" to the bard (every reference to dogs turned out to be disparaging, for example), and how Weberman or some such Dylanologist did the same with the Zimmerman songbook ("boots" coming out with a crucial lead in repeated images). How would the EC songbook fare if it were given the same treatment, I wondered?

[*Pause*] "Fingers" feature quite a lot... I wouldn't know, really; I hope there wouldn't be any image so predominant or clichéd. Like, with Springsteen, take away "night" and "highway" and "car" and "road" and there probably wouldn't be any songs left. [*Laughs*] I've never really thought about repetitive imagery, or style even. An American magazine picked up on internal rhyming in my songs, I'd never even heard of it.

Shoes seem to figure quite a lot.

Shoes, yeah, shoes were big early on. I don't think shoes are so important later on. I had a bit of a thing about shoes before I got into the business because I only had one pair, so when I went through a period of extravagance with clothes – I had a bit of a silly period with checkerboard suits and deliberately horrible clothes – I heard a gasp of horror one night from the purists when I walked onstage in a turquoise lamé jacket. But it was shoes mostly. I don't wear any of them now, I'm back to Martens.

There are lots of gangster images, lots of guns...

Yeah, I hate guns, maybe that's why I put them in, as it's the most repellent image. I like frightening songs, not to get heavy with people, it's all to make a point.

"THE CAMERA DOESN'T LIKE ME! EVERY TIME WE'VE BEEN ON *TOP OF THE POPS*, THE RECORD'S GONE DOWN THE NEXT WEEK"
ELVIS COSTELLO

There are lots of very British phrases, slang and backchat.

Yeah, I like using expressions I hear people use – "tuppenny ha'penny' millionaire", things I hear people say. I've got slang dictionaries at home but I don't use them, they're just good for checking up things you hear people say – like "bone orchard" [*graveyard*], which I heard and used. The only time I wrote a whole song out of those phrases was "Sunday's Best", where I got the whole song out of the *News Of The World*. That's another thing that comes up a lot – newspapers, the press. Yeah, that's mainly because I write a lot of songs out of them. "Beyond Belief" was another one I wrote sitting down reading the paper.

You hate the *News Of The World* and the gutter press.

It cheapens the language. I used to get it until I realised that it had ceased to serve a purpose, that it was the same stories every week. I used to have a morbid fascination, as there is with trash like that. In Australia I saw a copy of the *Daily Star* and it was like another language. It certainly wasn't English, it wasn't Australian...

GOING BACK TO America, you seem to have a very severe opinion of the place. Do you think we're under attack, not just in an obvious way with the weapons and bases and Reagan's attitude...

I think that we are, very definitely...

...but also from a gradual cultural takeover?

I still feel that America's fairly intimidated by England culturally. The one thing we've got that they haven't is history and a lot of old culture, and I think that gives more clout to what comes afterwards. I think they try to be very dismissive about it, but every so often they give in to one particular thing, whether it's The Beatles or more recently The Human League. It doesn't have to be a huge revolution for them, it just proves that their chauvinism isn't watertight. I think they get bored with what they've got over there. What's sad is that they pay so little attention to the good stuff under their noses. They've got great singers and writers in every field – the Mac Rebennacks, Delbert McClintons... Otis Rush, a current favourite of mine. I read articles about him and he's still playing where he was 20 years ago. I mean, what's going on? Then they have the nerve to champion these awful groups; that's where I start to get annoyed. The British take it to extremes and champion the most obscure people who aren't worth championing, but the Americans are so disrespectful about the great things they've got.

What happened to that film you did with Meat Loaf, *Americathon*? That never did get released, did it?

No, mercifully. It was awful, though I only had a cameo part in it anyway.

Have you thought about doing a film? It seems to be what people do.

I've been offered scripts but they were all so diabolical I thought I wouldn't get involved with it. I'd want not to be patronised, to do that as well as I do this, rather than do it as the next investment for the record company. I couldn't see myself acting anyway. The camera doesn't like me; I know that from watching myself on *Top Of The Pops*. Every time we've appeared on that programme, the record's gone down the following week. [*Laughs*]

So you'd want to write, then? Have you done any?

Yes, a few sketch things, things that aren't song lyrics. I've never wanted to, y'know, do my poems or short stories. I'd do it under a pseudonym so as not to try and use my name as a musician. Even in this business I've got doubts about the name.

PUNCH THE CLOCK

A technical knockout of '80s pop. And, behind the horn section, lurk two political classics.

BY PETER WATTS

RELEASED AUGUST 5, 1983

YOU CAN PROBABLY get a handle on Elvis Costello's feelings for *Punch The Clock* by the fact that, when asked to write sleevenotes for a 2003 re-release, he claimed to be "unable to recall a single further entertaining incident that occurred during these sessions", so simply reprinted the essay that prefaced the 1995 reissue, complete with typing errors. *Punch The Clock* is an awkward entry in Costello's catalogue. Boasting an atmosphere of superficial jollity, but also two of his finest, most deeply felt, political songs, it's an album that has to be considered a success on its own terms. It's the nature of those terms that left the strange taste in his mouth.

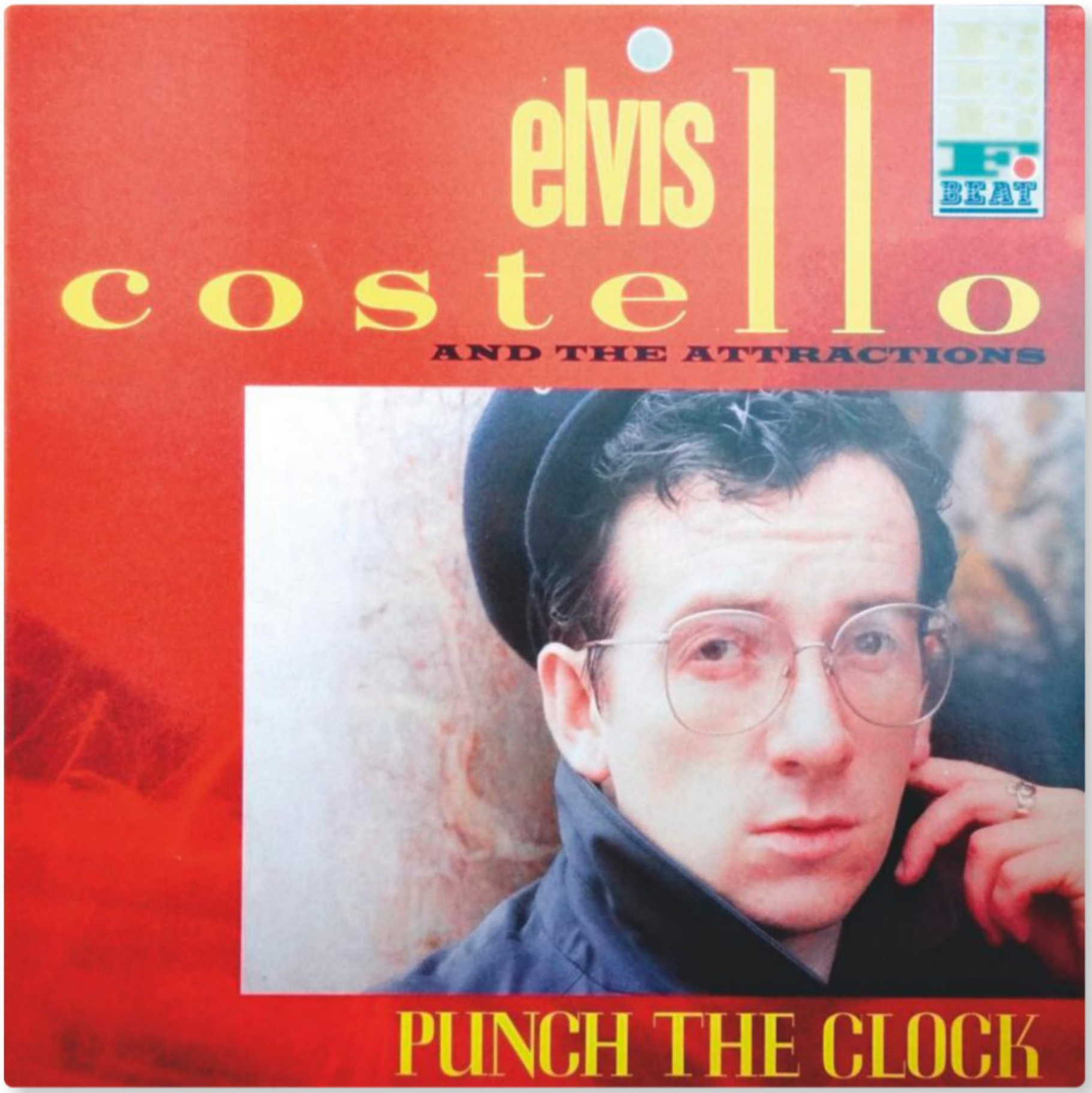
In 1983, Costello needed a hit, to get "reacquainted with the wonderful world of pop music". As he admitted, "If you allow contact with the mainstream audience to be severed for too long, you lose the freedom to do what you want to do." America hadn't shown much interest in *Almost Blue* or *Imperial Bedroom*, and the UK Top 30 hadn't been troubled since "Good Year For The Roses", so *Punch The Clock* has purpose and begins with gusto. "Let Them All Talk" and "Everyday I Write The Book" are frantic, full and ridiculously charming: the former is packed with crusading, peppy horns, the latter led off by a modern approximation of Motown backing harmonies. Slick, synthetic but by no means unpalatable, this was Costello embracing what he called the "passionless fads of that charmless time: the early '80s".

To his credit, it was a challenge Costello took seriously. First, he recruited the best pop producers in the land, Clive Langer and Alan Winstanley, who had married commercial success with artistic credibility on a succession of great singles with Madness, Teardrop Explodes and Dexys Midnight Runners and who brought with them the TKO Horns section. Costello wrote songs with the horns in mind, and when Langer asked him to stop his bedroom moping and write something with zest, Costello obliged, picking up the guitar for a sequence of songs about love and marriage. The first of these was "Let Them All Talk", which begins the album with a bounce that requires Costello produce a superb vocal performance to keep up, delivering a wry lyric that comments on "*the sad songs that the radio plays*".

It's followed by "Everyday I Write The Book", conceived by Costello as a Merseybeat spoof but successfully redrafted in the studio with a Motown feel. Backing vocals came from Claudia Fontaine and Caron Wheeler, known as Afrodiziak (Wheeler later sang Soul II Soul's "Back To Life"). The song exemplified the Langer/Winstanley process, patiently rebuilding a song track by track, using little of the original and demanding numerous retakes. It was a laborious process that didn't sit naturally with the spontaneity of The Attractions, but when it worked, the results were splendid. The excellent "Everyday I Write The Book" was, confessed Costello, "one of our very few entirely cheerful recordings". It reached No 33 in America, his first US hit.

Two songs in, and while Costello had made his point, he'd also set a pace impossible to maintain. The throwaway "The Greatest Thing", written to Langer's orders, is a "proud and wishful song on love and marriage" in which Costello rarely sounds as if he means what he's singing. It's followed by the woozy whimsy of "The Element Within Her" and "Love Went Mad", the latter an insubstantial hotchpotch that conceals a couple of arch lines ("*a self-made mug is hard to break*") amid careering inanity.

Just when a trend seems to be established – undercooked songs meets overbaked



THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"Given that one of pop's main goals must be popularity, *Punch The Clock* makes all the right moves. I do miss the spaciousness and relaxed pose of *Imperial Bedroom*, but there's no denying *Punch The Clock* is indeed punchy and it inhabits one area – uptempo party pop – which *Bedroom* did neglect."
GRAHAM LOCK, NME, JULY 30, 1983

"Costello's hardest hitting collection of songs, probably since *Get Happy!!*. This new LP sees a winning marriage of playful musical imagination harnessed to a batch of lyrics which find Costello's ability to blow a hole through the heart of the matter at 30 paces burning at maximum intensity... His lyrics are apparently being taught for O-level. *Punch The Clock* deserves a PhD."
ADAM SWEETING, MELODY MAKER, JULY 30, 1983

production – *Punch The Clock* hits you with not just the best song on the album, but one of the best songs Costello has written. "Shipbuilding" started with a piano melody written by Clive Langer. Asked to supply lyrics, Costello went on tour in Australia, where he followed the Falklands war between Argentina and Britain through the tabloids, and produced a stunning, sad but above all wise meditation about war, industry, economy and class. Released as a single with Robert Wyatt supplying elegiac vocals, "Shipbuilding" had been a minor hit in April 1983, but Costello always planned to do his own version and, to distinguish it from Wyatt's version, called in Chet Baker to contribute mournful trumpet. Wynton Marsalis and Miles Davis were also considered, but Baker's solo is magnificent, even if he was "pretty spaced out" according to Langer, who pieced it together from three takes.

Side two kicks leads off with the horn-happy "TKO (Boxing Day)", with Costello ungallantly noting that "*Now you don't look so glamorous, whenever I feel so amorous*" and offering a bewildering litany of puns: "*They put the numb into number, put the cut into cutie/They put the slum into slumber and the boot into beauty.*" The tempo is sustained on the light funk "Charm School", with Afrodisiak contributing some of their best backing vocals, before "The Invisible Man", pulled together from discarded lyrics, struts into view like a Kinks outtake. The sequence of "Mouth Almighty" and "King Of Thieves" offer a lowpoint, the former a half-hearted pop ballad, the second sprawling and shapeless. Given that the equally modest Squeeze-lite "The World And His Wife" is yet to come, the only thing saving the second half of the record from complete mediocrity is a song that, like "Shipbuilding", Costello didn't even write for the album. "Pills And Soap" was based on Grandmaster Flash's "The Message", with Costello delivering a tremendously cynical lyric, ostensibly about the iniquity of the tabloid press but also about political deceit and establishment hypocrisy, over a drum machine and Steve Nieve's dramatic piano. Stark and demanding, it came out before the general election of May 1983, with Costello styling himself The Imposter. He planned to bring it out on red vinyl in the event of Labour victory but, denied that satisfaction, instead covered The Beat's anti-Thatcher "Stand Down Margaret" on the BBC. Shortly after, *Punch The Clock* was released to a receptive public. Costello's calculated gamble had paid off, but it was a tightrope act he'd struggle to repeat.

TRACKMARKS PUNCH THE CLOCK

1. Let Them All Talk ★★★★
2. Everyday I Write The Book ★★★★
3. The Greatest Thing ★★★
4. The Element Within Her ★★★
5. Love Went Mad ★★
6. Shipbuilding ★★★★★
7. TKO (Boxing Day) ★★★
8. Charm School ★★★★
9. The Invisible Man ★★★
10. Mouth Almighty ★★
11. King Of Thieves ★★
12. Pills And Soap ★★★★★
13. The World And His Wife ★★

Label: F-Beat
Produced by: Clive Langer and Alan Winstanley
Recorded at: AIR Studios, London
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, gtr, synth, keys), Steve Nieve (piano, synth, organ), Bruce Thomas (bass), Pete Thomas (drums), Jim Paterson (trombone), Jeff Blythe (alto and baritone sax, clarinet), Paul Speare (tenor sax, flute), Dave Plews (trumpet), Stewart Robson (trumpet), Caron Wheeler (bk vocals), Claudio Fontaine (bk vcl), Chet Baker (trumpet), David Bedford (string arr); Morris Pert (percussion)
Highest chart position: UK 3; US 24

GOODBYE CRUEL WORLD

In which EC's negotiations with modern pop go somewhat awry: "That was really a fucked-up record!" BY LUKE TORN

RELEASED JUNE 18, 1984

CHANCES ARE, DESPITE Elvis Costello's enormous capacity for irony and vitriol, even he didn't mean for the title of his ninth album to be such a personal prophecy. Nonetheless, the wicked series of events swirling around him as summer 1984 beckoned – the final disintegration of his 10-year marriage, financial strife verging on bankruptcy – resulted in the release of *Goodbye Cruel World*, essentially the bitter end of Elvis' first golden era. By the time he regained his artistic footing, shedding longtime co-conspirators The Attractions, writing and touring with both T Bone Burnett and The Pogues, he was taking on a passel of noms de plume (take a bow, Howard Coward). He had all but buried 'Elvis Costello'.

But, as they say, it seemed like a good idea at the time. "Every Day I Write The Book", the catchy, snap-step single from ...*Cruel World*'s predecessor *Punch The Clock*, returned Costello to the charts in a big way in 1983, recasting punk's most eloquent angry voice as among the new-fangled crop of MTV pop hopefuls. The escalated game of chart sweepstakes required a suitable follow-up. "The Only Flame In Town", a slinky slice of faux R&B, replete with supper-club horns, cooing vocals and blue-eyed-soul superstar Daryl Hall on harmonies, was Costello's response. Ultimately, the song may have skimmed the realm of the popular, but it was a million miles from the pure chutzpah, revved-up guitars and emotional bloodbath of, say, "(I Don't Want To Go To) Chelsea".

Returning to the *Punch The Clock* production team of Clive Langer and Alan Winstanley, Costello was, albeit amid personal distress, permitting commercial interests to dictate artistic direction. On the surface, though, these seemed to be sensible moves. His new compositions sported pop hooks aplenty – once exposed, just try forgetting the carnivalesque, off-kilter (Madness-like?) melody of "Room With No Number". But in the context of Costello's contrarian artistry, especially the blunt-force trauma and prickly personal politics of his best work, one couldn't help but see *Goodbye Cruel World* as a misguided turn toward the trendy or the gauche. Or, as Elvis himself, as his own worst critic, would more succinctly state...

"That was really a fucked-up record. That's the worst one, really," he barked to journalist Nick Kent later, part of a series of self-denigrations on *Goodbye...*'s mere existence, "because I had all the arrangements arse-backwards, picked the wrong producers, then asked them to do an impossible job..."

Costello later revealed that his favourite record at the time – naturally – was Richard and Linda Thompson's break-up spectacular *Shoot Out The Lights* and that, briefly, he considered giving Sir Thompson a call to play guitar on *Goodbye Cruel World*. The prospect raises visions of a dark, intense folk-rock record of broken-heartedness, an amped-up, post-punk *Blood On The Tracks*. In fact, a wild, rollercoaster-ish *Blonde On Blonde*-style take of "I Hope You're Happy Now", later revamped for *Blood And Chocolate*, and a bone-chillingly stark cover of Thompson's "Withered And Died" (among a raft of raw, sometimes acoustic demos and bonus tracks on *Goodbye...*'s subsequent expansions) hint at what a true-to-vision ...*Cruel World* might have sounded like.

All of which is to say, Costello's muse was hardly off in the ditch, as is often presumed. Just that the recorded evidence reveals a mismatch: material at cross-purposes with presentation; fuzzy or overly busy arrangements at cross-purposes with mood, purpose and lyrical intensity. Still, working through regret and guilt, anger and desperation, intermittently grasping at the shards of his broken marriage, Costello came up with a core repertory. "Home

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"*Goodbye Cruel World* evinces no critical lapse in quality. From where I'm listening, in fact, it sounds like the most approachable Costello LP since *Trust*... There is also a sharp sense of spontaneity here."
ALLAN JONES, MELODY MAKER, JULY 28, 1984

"Why, after seven years of nearly consistent brilliance, has Elvis Costello finally made a disappointing LP? Yet there is nothing downright incompetent – it's all beautifully played – but neither is there a single self-penned song that wouldn't have been considered a filler, a less-than-classic, on any previous Costello LP."
MAT SNOW, NME, AUGUST 4, 1984

Truth" might be the most heart-ripping cut – think a quirky riff on The Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" – but "Love Field" is ...*Cruel World*'s stunner. With its pulsing balladic arrangement, interweaving keyboards and a suitably present, impassioned Costello vocal, it catalogues a relationship's bit-by-bit erosion, from true love to who cares: "*You think you're different from the rest/But you don't know how you've changed*," he sings in pure hangdog fashion.

Some of the album's cuts, however, crash with an ugly thud. The simple kiss-off "Sour Milk-Cow Blues" aims for straightforward, off-the-cuff rocker, but sounds stilted, a sign of how far Costello had drifted from his pub-rock roots. A soul obscurity, a cover of '60s Memphis combo the Teacher's Edition's "I Wanna Be Loved", with its smooth synth-cum-sax breaks and full-on '80s sonic puffery, is so artificial and empty it hurts. It would rank as Costello's last chart showing for years.

Others aren't so easy to write off. "The Great Unknown" may sound a tad rushed, even thrown away, but is regal in its depiction of bewilderment in the face of life's mysteries; "The Deportees Club" recoups a measure of classic Costello piss and vinegar, an "I'm So Bored With The USA" revisited. "*In America the law is a piece of ass*," he sneers. And then there's "Peace In Our Time". Hymn-like, majestic, haunting, yet scathing in its indictment of politicians' corruption traced down through the ages, it might emanate from Thatcher/Reagan-era criminality, but its hard-boiled sentiments remain just as relevant in 2014. With "Shipbuilding" and "Pills And Soap" before it, plus the later "Tramp The Dirt Down" from *Spike*, it forms the most pointedly elegiac, even transcendental, view of politics offered within the '80s pop milieu.

Beyond the reminiscences, revisionism and lashing reviews, the most precise commentary on *Goodbye Cruel World* – what it was, what it could have been – lies in the peculiar double life of "The Comedians". As executed, it's a half-realised, two-and-a-half-minute ditty, an easily forgotten trifle sporting a shopping-mall arrangement, barely-awake vocals, incidental piano tinkling. Asked to contribute to *Mystery Girl*, Roy Orbison's momentous comeback, Costello rewrote it. Discovering newfound depth, dimension and drama within (something many of *Goodbye*...'s songs would, eventually, receive from the concert stage), he retooled it as a superb, if absurdist, bit of melodrama, a bizarre David Lynch-ian sequel of sorts to Orbison's classic "Running Scared", wherein the protagonist, stranded on a Ferris wheel, watches his love steal away with another.

TRACKMARKS GOODBYE CRUEL WORLD

1. The Only Flame In Town ★★
2. Home Truth ★★★★
3. Room With No Number ★★★★
4. Inch By Inch ★★★
5. Worthless Thing ★★
6. Love Field ★★★★★
7. I Wanna Be Loved ★
8. The Comedians ★★★
9. Joe Porterhouse ★★
10. Sour Milk-Cow Blues ★★
11. The Great Unknown ★★★
12. The Deportees Club ★★★
13. Peace In Our Time ★★★★★

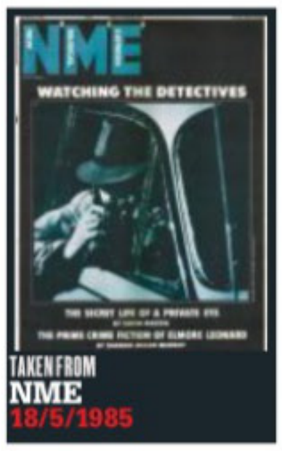
Label: F-Beat
Produced by: Clive Langer and Alan Winstanley
Recorded at: Sarm West, London, mixed at Genetic Studios, Streatley
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitars, anvil), Steve Nieve (keyboards), Bruce Thomas (bass), Pete Thomas (drums), Gary Barnacle (saxophone), Jim Paterson (trombone), Luis Jardim (percussion), Daryl Hall (vocals on "The Only Flame In Town"), Green Gartside (vocals on "I Wanna Be Loved")
Highest chart position: UK 10; US 35

"I like being hysterical sometimes"

The only flame in town casts a gimlet eye over the pop competition, and MAT SNOW learns that *Goodbye Cruel World* is "the worst record of the best songs that I've written." Then Costello joins up with T Bone Burnett to become communist bluegrass tearaways The Coward Brothers. MARSHALL LAW joins in with the japes. "Most people do concept albums. We didn't have enough material for an album, so we just did a concept song!"

ESTATE OF KEITH MORRIS/REDFERNS

ARCHIVE ♦ 1985 ♦



TODAY WE FIND Elvis Costello in a more relaxed mood, padding around in the comfy old carpet slippers of pop's grouchy but lovable Uncle Brian, as he is fondly known in our last remaining haunts of the soulful semiquaver and passion-filled G-string.

Do you relish your avuncular role?
"Wha'?!?"

Like, your bestowal of approval, the Elvis Seal Of Good Housekeeping, on such as Aztec Camera and Prefab Sprout?
"My impression of Prefab Sprout was with three gigs, and it was as if I'd produced their record or something. They're responsible for their own failings, they're their own band and nothing to do with me. I thought their first record had some really good things on it, the first four singles were brilliant; I think the new record's a load of nonsense, and I feel the same way about Aztec Camera. I hated seeing my name linked with all these people. It's just lazy journalism."

As for the second Pogues LP...
"Conspicuously, I'm not producing Aztec Camera or Prefab Sprout but I am producing this album. Deduce what you want from that. And I believe there's a version of 'A Pair Of Brown Eyes' being recorded on the other side of the Atlantic by my brother Coward... (aka lanky Texan songsmith T Bone Burnett, live collaborator with the solo Costello late last year as The Coward Brothers). He's producing a Peter Case album, who is in The Plimsouls, who at least has found his voice."

Meanwhile, The Coward Brothers' first single is released in June or July.
"It's a cultural clash between bluegrass and Italian Communism. It's like The Louvin Brothers backed by The Pretty Things."

Is the American trad-rock Renaissance a genuine event or a figment of the music papers' imagination?
"Ask the bands sitting where they are, and I think they'll tell you it's a figment of the imagination, because they're still struggling to get a gig. You try and find The Beat Farmers in Los Angeles and you'll find them on a college station struggling to get on the radio, and they're being lauded here as the Next Big Thing.

"A lot of the bands are really good, but the danger is that's a blanket acceptance thing. Once you get a movement, it's here-we-go-again, the 2-Tone thing, the mod revival. One band might be good and the other half-dozen a load of rubbish. I can name half a dozen bands in America that I think are really great, which I can't in England. So that means to me that American music is more interesting at the moment, simply because they're the records I choose to play. But that doesn't mean a blanket acceptance of everything American.

"What I really hate is the mindless racist attitude of the English audience to American acts simply because they're American. It's beneath people to take exception to people simply because you don't like the politics of the country. It's ignorant. It's parallel to the very thing people are supposed to be railing at.

"You've got to be careful of this blanket acceptance of American music. It brings out this whole new brand of conservatism with a small 'c' because it's so traditional. But the alternative to that is this pseudo-sensationalism that you have with Prince and Frankie Goes To Hollywood. I think Bruce Springsteen's a very sincere person who's had his life stolen from him by success. He's not apparently affected by it in the ordinary sense, but his amount of moves has been limited, which is a shame. But he still writes the odd good song."

How about Britain's own Bruce: is Billy Bragg opening up our ears to a more dissenting rock'n'roll?
"Well, I dunno. There are some people listening to him and there are other people talking at the back. I wish him all the very best. I think he's sincere and I really like his stuff. I did a show with him at the Logan Hall and it was extraordinary, the feeling he had."

> "SPRINGSTEEN'S A SINCERE PERSON WHO'S HAD HIS LIFE STOLEN BY SUCCESS... HE STILL WRITES THE ODD GOOD SONG"
> ELVIS COSTELLO

Is Elvis' prolific diversification in the last six months a consequence of a fallow period as a writer and performer?
"I just decided it'd been seven years without any longer than a month's break and two years with five days' holiday. I thought it was a good time to stop, because I was getting bored. Not even bored, really. Getting a sort of maniacal nervous energy. I was working on complete nervous energy for the last couple of months last year. I was still enjoying it, but I don't know how much the rest of the band were. I was playing longer and longer shows, and it was a sort of hysterical energy you get when you're tired. I like being hysterical sometimes."

***Goodbye Cruel World* reconsidered?**
"I think it's the worst record of the best songs that I've written. I'm not saying that the songs are better than any others I've written. It's the worst realised.

"If an explanation doesn't illuminate beyond the action, then there's no point to it. And equally, the action is pointless if you have to explain. There's always a dilemma, particularly in what I do, in choosing the thin line between explaining everything and robbing people of their imaginative process, and leaving it open to interpretation and things being lost. My reasoning behind writing lyrics which sometimes people say are obscure is they're deliberately supposed to stimulate. Maybe one of the failures of the last record was that there were very good stories in some of the songs which the music didn't illuminate, so for me to illuminate them now is pointless.

Very succinct. Any last words?
"Er, goodbye?"

Nice one, Uncle Bri. Keep taking the pills.

THERE ARE THOSE who will surely remember them, and there are those who surely will not; and the latter are the losers, because they will never have rolled bigger stones, will never have known the teenage thrill of cruising the local store-parade drag with the top down, her feet in your lap, her hair in your eyes, and the sound of The Coward Brothers in all their lasting glory, blasting from the radio, their voices a melodic clutch that seemed to embrace every aspect of adolescence in that permanent summer before all of us were old.

For most of us, The Coward Brothers were the definitive sound of our youth; a soundtrack for our juvenile fumblings, declarations and early infatuations. Listening to their records today is a passport to yesterday, a passport to the innocence, the idealisms of a past we can recall now in our most nostalgic dreams of other times, other places, other people, some of whom we were ourselves. The Coward Brothers, antique fixtures these days in the furniture of modern pop, are a bridge between what we are and what we were, evoking through their music memories of first kisses, last buses, broken hearts and broken engagements.

For nearly a decade, when all of us were younger, The Coward Brothers *were* the spokesmen of generations. The music seemed to die, somehow, the day they decided to split, driven continuously apart by commercial pressures of the industry, the petty spitefulness of too much fame and influence, the overwhelming tensions of success.

HENRY COWARD, YOU may remember, assumed the alias of an old Texan blues guitarist and became T Bone. As T Bone, Henry recorded a series of solo albums whose merits were often extolled by the press and ignored by the public. Subsequently, he found God, toured with Bob Dylan and was to be found only two years ago serving at tables, a barman in a cheap Las Vegas saloon, benign, enlightened and broke.

Howard Coward played the opening ball of his solo career the year the King died; he called himself Elvis, then, and quickly became famous for the sheer malignancy of his songs, the spite and venom of his writing. He had several notable hits, but eventually the prolific nature of his talent seemed to exhaust his audience. His records continued to be widely admired, but

they no longer sold in popular quantities and his career began to wilt, as its commercial momentum staggered to a faltering halt.

By the middle of last year, it had become clear that some sort of reconciliation was essential if their respective careers were to be rescued from a permanent nosedive. Old wounds were bandaged, former hurts repaired, when Henry and Howard toured America during the summer. The former contract binding their reunion was finally signed last December when they played together at the Royal Festival Hall at London's South Bank. Such was the success of this appearance that they were quickly signed to the enterprising IMP label, home of the mighty Men They Couldn't Hang, a group who always deserve a gratuitous plug. Now, The Coward Brothers have a single out on that label. "The People's Limousine" is a vintage Coward Brothers cut, a brisk confection of guitars and voices, Henry's typically surreal lyrical insights perfectly matched here alongside Howard's characteristically trenchant social and sexual observations.

It was the release of the single that bought us together one Sunday evening in July. The Cowards were due that evening to play their second London reunion concert at the Duke Of York's Theatre and as we spoke a small crowd of longtime fans was already queuing in the street outside. They are an odd physical match, as Brothers often are. Henry is tall, gangling, a sprawl of limbs; his face is long, pale, his features permanent, but somehow bland, except for his eyes, which are bright with mischievous excitement. Howard, meanwhile, is squat, bearded, dressed sombrely in layers of black, his eyes hidden behind impenetrable shades.

Finding them together after all these years is unnerving. I remember them most vividly as images on a television screen, a kind of flickering, monochrome flashback to an earlier, less complicated time. The reality of meeting them is curiously disconnecting, much like their conversation, which is by turns fractured, facetious and peculiar: make of it what you will, but don't expect much of it to make any particular sense.

To business: after so many years in the wilderness, what had brought the Coward Brothers back together?

"Bob Geldof," Howard said. "Bob called us and asked us if we could play at the Live Aid concert. We couldn't, but we decided to get back together anyway."

Was there much public enthusiasm for the reunion?

"Curiously, not as much as I would have expected," Henry reflected, his voice a languid drawl.

" It seems like a lot of people have forgotten about us."

Howard elaborated. "But you only have to look around these groups today; most of them have stolen everything from us. They're all doing our routine. It started with The Beatles, you know. They took everything that we had from us, even their suits. They used to go to the same tailor."

"His name is Les," Henry pitched in, informatively. "I'd recommend him to anyone."

I made a note of Les' address and wondered what was the first song the Cowards played when they got back together.

"Well," Howard explained, "we thought we needed a signature tune, if you like, so we did 'We're Ragged, But We're Right', because we are."

What had seemed so appropriate about that song?

"You'll have to ask our audience," Howard said evasively. "If you can get through to them,

TOM SHEEHAN

Henry and Howard Coward, London, July 7, 1985

that is. I think you'll find that most of them have this dedicated trance-like quality, they tend to look like they're asleep most of the time."

"I've noticed that, too," Henry agreed, suddenly very perky. "At first I thought they were all dead or at least in an advanced state of coma, but Howard fortunately pointed out to me that they were actually in a deep trance, a condition brought upon them by the undivided attention they give our music. Lately, we've been able to shake them out of their torpor a little, but it's not easy... a lot of them are real old by now. Like us."

"The problem with our audience," Howard went on, scratching at his beard, "is getting the stretcher space for them in venues like this. And wheelchair access is always a problem."

Did it worry them at all that their audiences veered towards the geriatric rather then the young and the nubile?

"We just have to accept it," Howard admitted. "We're yesterday's men as far as today's pop is concerned."

Surely, there would be a few young people at the concert?

"Yeah, there probably will be," Henry drawled. "I think there'll be like some gawking curiosity-seekers out there..."

"Ghouls," Howard spat venomously. "Grave robbers."

"I think our new hit might bring in a younger audience," Henry said, bringing the conversation around to the topic of "The People's Limousine", which they were both obviously desperate to plug. "That's a true story, that song," Henry continued at his own deliberate pace. "We wrote it on our reunion tour of Italy. We were over in Rome there, and there was this Communist promoter we were playing for and he got us a Communist limousine. Italy is such a paradox, caught between Communism and Catholicism. It's so crazy that they exist there, side by side."

"It's a sort of fly poster of the world, Italy," Howard reflected. "Italy's like layers of fly posters peeling off; that's the way I see it.... Layers of fly posters, most of them advertising our old gigs... it's like layers of flyposters of our old gigs superimposed one on another, one triumph on another, and they are peeling, like memories of our life together. Italy's really a kind of metaphor for our career."

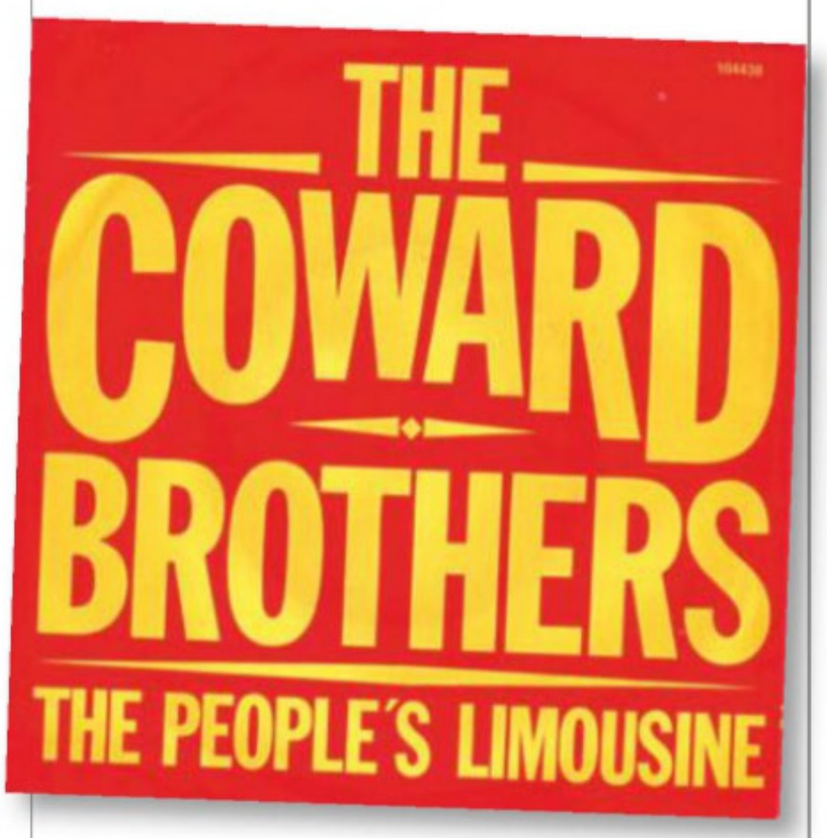
"Yeah." Henry nodded. "I like to think of it that way, too."

What, specifically, had inspired the song?

"We were in Florence," Henry explained, "and there's like this 60-foot statue of Michelangelo's *David*, I think it is, outside the Uffizi Museum. And I was looking at that and I was really staggered by it, and I walked down the street and there's this river and this guy was fishing, and he got a bite and he reeled in the line and he's caught a rat, this terrible wet rat. It was awful..."

"But that's not really what the song's about, is it?" Howard asked, as puzzled as your correspondent. "Oh no," Henry continued, a master of the art of baffle. "The thing about that song is that every word has a concept behind it. It's a concept song. Like, even in the title, the word 'The' and 'People's' and 'Limousine', they're all separate concepts when you really think about it. Like 'Limousine', when you really think hard about it, you go, 'Hey – limousine, that's a long black car!' It's like cracking a code. You might not understand the concept at first, but it will all become clear eventually. Just keep working at it, man, that's my advice."

"Most people," Howard said, "do concept albums. We didn't have enough material for an album, so we just did a concept song."



"THE PEOPLE'S LIMOUSINE", of course, is only the latest hit from the talented twosome: over the years, they've been responsible for some of the greatest pop songs ever written.

"I think people would be surprised if they knew how many songs have been recorded by other people without us getting any credit at all," Howard claimed. "I think our audiences recognise the songs which belong to us; I think they know which ones were stolen from us. Basically, we invented pop music as it's known today, but we've never been given the credit we deserve."

"WE INVENTED THIS MUSIC, NOW WE WANT TO SEE WHETHER WE CAN DESTROY IT!"
HOWARD COWARD

Did this neglect make them feel bitter and jaundiced?

"Why should we be bitter?" Howard asked, unconvincingly placid.

"We're not bitter at all," Henry lied. "Who cares that Paul McCartney's the richest man in showbusiness and hasn't written an original tune in his life? Who cares that Paul McCartney has more money then he knows what to do with and he's earned it all by stealing our songs? I don't. I'm not bitter."

"Neither am I," Howard added, gnawing a hole in the armchair.

Was money pretty hard to come by for The Coward Brothers?

"It's not like the old days," Henry said wistfully. "That's for sure. But things are looking up, you know. You know that's happening; I think we're riding back on this whole new American music craze that's sweeping the world right now. All these new bands like REM and Jason & The Scorchers and The Beat Farmers, they've been doing our old songs and people have been buying our old songs, which I think is pretty amazing..."

"Especially since most of them have been deleted and melted down so there's even more vinyl to press even more Lone Justice albums," Howard grouched, this last comment making The Coward Brothers sound rather disdainful of today's pop heroes.

"I apologise if I sound a little bitter," Henry said, contrite.

"I don't," Howard snarled, curtly.

"Well, I really appreciate them making everybody aware of all the great stuff we've done in the past," Henry replied, bickering.

Did they think that their role in the history of pop music had been overlooked at all?

"Totally," Howard said, aggressively. "I watched all these programmes on television about the history of rock'n'roll, and we're never mentioned. You stop anybody in the street and ask them if they've ever heard of The Coward Brothers and they just go blank. They haven't even heard of our father, half of them..."

Your father?

"Yeah," Howard said. "Noël."

Noël Coward: of course.

"He was a writer," Henry said. "Wrote plays. Kind of funny guy."

What sort of childhood did they have with him as their father?

"Gay," Howard said. "I mean gay in the old-fashioned sense of the word. It's an archaic expression, you know, from the old country."

The old country?

"Yeah." Howard went on. "We're not at liberty to reveal its location and, anyway, it's been swallowed up in the European reshuffle of territories. Our old country is precious to us, but probably exists now only in the memories of a few old people and in the wood of the instruments that we play. These instruments," he said, indicating the acoustic guitars in the corner of the dressing room, "are made from the wood of the trees of the old country. So these instruments are really a part of the old country. These instruments, and the wood from which they are made, and the sap that's in the wood, that's probably the only bit of the old country that's left. So I always feel when I've got my

The Coward Brothers onstage at the Duke Of York's Theatre, London, July 7, 1985

guitar in my hand that I'm holding a little bit of the old country."

The roots, perhaps?
"No," Howard pondered. "More of the sap, I think."

Had their father been much of a shaping influence on them?
"No," Howard declared. "He was more of a writer then a sculptor."

"To be perfectly honest," Henry said, "I don't think he wanted us to follow him into showbusiness. He said we'd never make a living out of it. He was probably right."

Was theirs a neglected childhood?
"The answer to that is in the song," Henry replied vaguely.

In any particular song?
"Well," Howard ruminated, "if 'The People's Limousine' is the fly poster of our career peeling off in the imagination of our audience, as a metaphorical superimposition of civilisation, then perhaps a song like 'The Wild Side Of Life' is like the postage stamp on the postcard of our childhood."

THEY'VE BEEN AWAY so long; I wondered whether anyone these days remembered The Coward Brothers with the affection and loyalty they enjoyed in their heyday.

"Realistically, I don't think so," Henry said. "I'd guess that 20 to 30 per cent of the people who'll hopefully read this article won't even have heard of us."

"The worst part of it all," Howard confessed, suddenly a little morbid, "is that people didn't know that we've been dead for years. And there's nothing worse than dying and coming back to find that they haven't even written your obituary."

If you could have composed your own obituary, what would you have said?
"Actually," Henry said, "I did write my own epitaph. It said: LIFE IS A SNAP."

What was yours, Howard?
"Mine was unprintable."

Was it unreadable?
"Knowing you," Henry hissed at Howard, "it was probably unlistenable."

Trying to put a stop to this bickering, I moved along to the next question. Now that The Coward Brothers were back in the public eye with a new single, where would they go from here?
"Well," Howard said, " you know, we might easily disappear again. Not that we're bitter or anything, but if we find that the audience doesn't love us, then we could easily vanish as quickly as we re-emerged."

Did they really crave the adulation of their audience?
"We don't crave their adulation," Howard replied. "We just crave their money."

Were they confident that "The People's Limousine" would be a hit?
"Not really," Howard said. "It's in the hands of the public. Unfortunately, they're always a little slow to pick up on true innovators like ourselves. I think it always takes the public time to wake up to their own secret desires. For years, they've been cruelly misled. They've been duped, for years and years."

If the response to their appearance at the Duke Of York's were enthusiastically received, would they be tempted back on the boards?
"The answer to that burning question," Howard said, "is again in the fickle hands of the public. I think that's where we should leave ourselves. I always have, in the past."

"The thing is," Henry pointed out. "I don't think the public will really catch up with us for another 100 years."

Showtime was by now only minutes away. I asked Howard if he had a final message for his public.
"I just want them to know that we're back," he said. "And this time, we've come to claim what is rightfully ours. We invented this music, now we want to see whether we can destroy it."

AND WITH THAT, they were off. Henry and Howard, legends in their own lifetimes, heading now for another spotlight on another stage.

Backstage, the applause from the theatre echoed through chilly corridors, and one was left to wonder whether we'd ever see their like again.

TOM SHEEHAN

KING OF AMERICA

Introducing The Costello Show, The Little Hands Of Concrete, and an illustrious new supporting cast… Declan MacManus' crowning glory? BY ANDREW MUELLER

RELEASED FEBRUARY 21, 1986

WE'VE BECOME ACCUSTOMED, 37 years into his career, to Elvis Costello's unpredictable waxes and wanes. However, around the time of the release of his 10th album, *King Of America*, there was considerable muttering to the effect that Costello was no sure long-term proposition. He had gone up like a rocket, this argument went, releasing five nigh-flawless albums in as many years straight off the launchpad, and had since been wafting slowly back down through less rarefied stratospheres, via a country covers project, a somewhat overheated orchestral pop opus, a Philly soul digression and, most latterly, the muddled, portentously titled *Goodbye Cruel World*. When he broke what was, by his standards, an epochal silence of two years with a hoarse, desperate swipe at The Animals' "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood", many assumed that Elvis had, to all intents and purposes, left the building.

The outward appearance of *King Of America* offered little reassurance. The LP was formally credited, somewhat bafflingly, to The Costello Show (one of few places his familiar pseudonym appeared at all, with songs credited to Costello's real name, Declan MacManus, and guitars to The Little Hands Of Concrete, owing to a predilection for in-studio string-breaking). The cover was a sepia headshot of Costello sporting a beard, brocaded jacket, crown, and expression of bored insouciance, of the sort that might well preface inquiring, of some simpering serf, "And what is it that you do?" The sleevenotes prompted further bewilderment. It was surprising enough that The Attractions appeared on only one track, rather more so that for much of the album Costello was backed by men who had, until a decade previously, been playing for another Elvis: the TCB Band themselves, James Burton, Jerry Scheff and Ron Tutt. Also aboard were supreme jazz bassist (and once Mr Ella Fitzgerald) Ray Brown, former Little Richard (and almost everybody else) drummer Earl Palmer, and such top-drawer sessioneers as T-Bone Wolk, Mitchell Froom and Jim Keltner. If Costello had submitted to hubris, he hadn't done it by halves.

In his disarmingly candid essay accompanying the 1995 Demon reissue, Costello explained himself. "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" had been Columbia's choice of single, rather than his. The sidelining of The Attractions had been semi-accidental. An original plan to have them play on half the album had been overtaken by the fact that by the time they arrived in LA, sessions had gone so swimmingly that more than half was already done – leaving, as Costello recalled, "my sullen and estranged band hanging around our hotel harbouring a grudge or honing an embittered anecdote" (a good few of the latter, barely fictionalised, would surface a few years later in Bruce Thomas' score-settling memoir, *The Big Wheel*). It was hopefully some consolation that the one song The Attractions did play on, "Suit Of Lights", was very arguably the best thing on what was clearly, once you got around to playing the damn thing, one of Costello's very finest records.

Costello, steeped in a learned love of Americana, was always going to make a country record – his own country record, that is (*Almost Blue*, the respectful covers album recorded in Nashville with Billy Sherrill a few years earlier, felt in retrospect like EC's establishment of his credentials in this department). But throughout *King Of America*, Costello is both too smart and too confident to adapt himself to country tropes – that way, he knows, lies fatuous imposture, empty pastiche and the rarely edifying spectacle of Englishmen wearing cowboy boots. Instead, he adapts country to Elvis Costello – and country responds enthusiastically, as a genre always sympathetic to unusual voices and cunning lyricism would. Any doubts that he'd

struck the right note were vanquished within the year when a reading of the rueful hangover romp "The Big Light" appeared as the opening track on Johnny Cash's *Johnny Cash Is Coming To Town* (other *King*... tracks to have been adopted by American country singers include Laura Cantrell's "Indoor Fireworks" and Rhett Miller's "Brilliant Mistake", and while it remains an outrage that George Jones never recorded "Our Little Angel", Rosanne Cash did).

Crucially, for all that he is recording in some of America's best-known studios with some of America's best-regarded musicians, Costello never loses sight of the fact that he's a stranger here – the opening lines of opening track "Brilliant Mistake" sound, in context, like a caution against succumbing to these kind of assumptions ("*He thought he was the king of America/Where they pour Coca-Cola just like vintage wine*"). On the heavily Cash-influenced "Glitter Gulch", he's the aghast, seduced hotel-room-flickerer between gaudy gameshows on US television, underpinned by a James Burton masterclass on guitar and dobro. On the gentle waltz "American Without Tears" – a true story, by Costello's account – he sees something of himself in two elderly English GI brides drinking in a hotel bar, who don't quite belong here but can never really go home (a sequel, "American Without Tears No 2", can be found on the *Out Of Our Idiot* compilation).

For all its explicit rooting in foreign soil, *King Of America* peaks at the points at which Costello is at his most personal – and therefore his most universal. "I'll Wear It Proudly" and its companion piece "Jack Of All Parades" are two of his most poised love songs, the former a beautiful devotional leavened with grateful humility ("*In shameless moments/You made more of me than just a mess*"), the latter an acknowledgement of the terror of losing something you never expected to have ("*When we first met I didn't know what to do/My old love lines were all worn out on you*"). The presumable subject of this pair, former Pogues bass player and soon-to-be Mrs Costello Cait O'Riordan, is also credited with co-writing the winning rockabilly shuffle "Lovable".

King Of America isn't perfect. At 15 tracks, it may be too much of a good thing – it could have lived without the rehearsal-room workout of JB Lenoir's "Eisenhower Blues" and the oversold ballad "Poisoned Rose". But it's a great record in its own right, and an important one, for better and for worse, in confirming to Costello that there might be life beyond The Attractions – after, that is, he'd put the old gang back together for one more job...

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"If *King Of America* has a precedent, it would have to be the claustrophobic, grime-time scenarios of *Trust*, but where the latter's sense of guilty complicity and brooding menace spoke of the torture of love gone wrong, these songs possess a stoical calmness, a more measured but no less painfully revealing tone. In many ways, this LP concerns the burial of the old Elvis Costello and the rebirth of Declan MacManus."

SEAN O'HAGAN, NME, FEBRUARY 22, 1986

"The contents of *King Of America* present us with a man quite adamantly not suffering from brewer's droop of the muse. Yes, readers, this is easily his finest album, well certainly since the halcyon mega-conceits of *Imperial Bedroom*."

NICHOLAS BENEDICT KENT, MELODY MAKER, FEBRUARY 22, 1986

TRACKMARKS KING OF AMERICA

1. Brilliant Mistake ★★★★
2. Lovable ★★★★
3. Our Little Angel ★★★★
4. Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood ★★★
5. Glitter Gulch ★★★★
6. Indoor Fireworks ★★★★★
7. Little Palaces ★★★★
8. I'll Wear It Proudly ★★★★★
9. American Without Tears ★★★★★
10. Eisenhower Blues ★★★
11. Poisoned Rose ★★★
12. The Big Light ★★★★
13. Jack Of All Parades ★★★★★
14. Suit Of Lights ★★★★★
15. Sleep Of The Just ★★★★

Label: F-Beat
Produced by: T Bone Burnett, Elvis Costello, Larry Kalman Hirsch, David Brent Miner
Recorded at: Ocean Way and Sunset Sound, LA
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitar, mandolin), T-Bone Wolk (accordion, gtr), T Bone Burnett (gtr), James Burton (gtr), Mitchell Froom (organ, harpsichord), Tom Canning (piano), Steve Nieve (piano), Jerry Scheff (bass), Ray Brown (bass), Bruce Thomas (bass), Mickey Curry (drums), Earl Palmer (drums), Ron Tutt (drums), Pete Thomas (drums), Jim Keltner (drums), Michael Blair (marimba), David Hidalgo (vcl), Jo-El Sonnier (accord)
Highest chart position: UK 11; US 39

ARCHIVE ♦ 1986 ♦

"Elvis Costello became a character I played because people wouldn't let him grow up..."

Elvis is dead... Long live the King Of America! DANNY KELLY goes to bury Costello, and ends up celebrating a startlingly reinvigorated genius, keen to shake off old clichés and begin anew. He's just a soul whose intentions are good... Oh Lord, please don't let him be misunderstood!

HOW VERY, VERY odd. It's the morning of February 14 and my barely opened eyes are staring at the floor beneath my letterbox. There, a conspicuously bare square of mat squats where my usual, and confidently anticipated, avalanche of Valentines should be.

Never mind – a mental shrug – they'll be along with the second post. But still, it's a poor start to a day I fully expect to get progressively worse, the day I come face to face with Elvis Costello...

Y'see, four weeks ago I reviewed Costello's "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" 45, his first real release for two years or more. Shocked by the cut's numbing negativity, by the bloodshot shambles of Costello's voice, by fleeting glimpses of him around London last summer and autumn, and by the grimly persistent rumours that circulate about him, I lambasted both the record and its creator.

Abandoning the distanced consideration of the unbiased commentator in favour of the frenzied lather of the wits-end fan, I accused the erstwhile main Attraction of letting a shifting-sands personal life and an overdeveloped fondness for the bottled bravura wither his prodigious talent. I numbered the single as an abdication, a disowning of the past, and wondered – though I prayed otherwise – if it marked the beginning of the end, artistically, for one of the greats.

Events since then have snowballed with eyeblink rapidity. Within hours of the review's publication, an indignant, bemused and apparently intrigued Costello was on the hotline, demanding a session on the couch with *NME*'s newly installed cut-price psychiatrist.

Three days later he appeared on *The Tube* looking and sounding, by recent standards especially, remarkably healthy, alert and upful.

The slight sense of queasiness this apparition installed in me became full scale ashen-faced panic when, a few days before the scheduled shrink-in, a tape of El's new LP became wedged in my Walkman. *King Of America* is not one, but a whole series of departures for Costello, seems highly unlikely to have been the work of a clapped out, self-destructive drunk, and is, splutter, his best stuff for years.

The sickly tang of humble pie filled my mouth, the bitter aroma of sackcloth and ashes my nostrils, then, as I trudged to our appointed rendezvous – nobody steps lightly to their own funeral, to their very own St Valentine's Day Massacre. But be brave – he could turn out to be a stark staring fruitcake after all, his cracking record a fluke, couldn't he? Couldn't he?

"YOUR REVIEW WAS HYSTERICAL ...PSYCHOTIC! I WAS WORRIED ABOUT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH!"
ELVIS COSTELLO

THIS LAST SUCK-THUMB crumb of comfort is given a considerable boost as the door of Costello's publisher's office swings open. There he sits, blackly regaled in a calf-length frock coat, a matching top hat on the table before him. A punk funeral director? The Pope Of Pop demoted to monsignor? It's hardly the street clobber of Joe Normal, anyway, is it? But pogoing to conclusions landed me in this mess in the first place, so I'll reserve judgement, keep cool.

Or at least as cool as is possible once I realise that Elvis is not alone, that the latest resident in the warm part of his much-rendered heart – The Pogues' angular bassist, Cait O'Riordan – is a distinctly chilly presence in the corner. You know how it is – call someone a devil-worshipping child-eater and they'll laugh it off... It's their brother/mother/husband/girlfriend that stabs you in some dimlit back-alley. Maybe that's why he's sporting the undertaker's togs...

But, thankfully, Cait departs to search for shoes and Elvis settles tensely into a sofa. We've still hardly spoken when suddenly, from the depths of his voluminous black leather Gladstone bag, he pulls, like a rabbit from a magician's hat, a large bottle of very expensive whisky. "I thought we'd get through this during the interview..."

A two-second eternity crawls by. He – still nervous – cackles hopefully. I – still (more) nervous – do not. Oh, I see, it's a joke. The dull thud of a terminally earthbound lead balloon is heard nearby. We'd better start.

DEREK RIDGERS

The sad hatter: risktaker, pisstaker, undertaker...

ARCHIVE ♦ 1986 ♦

ELVIS COSTELLO DESPERATELY wants to talk about his new LP – it's very important to him – but that comes later. For now he's getting something off his chest.

"I found your review hysterical, in both senses of the word. I found it psychotic! I was very worried about your mental health..."

Well thanks very much I'm sure, but...

"It betrayed more of your neuroses than mine... you don't even know me! Someone wished me luck with this interview. I don't think it's me that needs the luck...

"I wasn't hurt by it. If anything it will have made lots of people curious about the record. Constantly being told how good someone is gets to be a pain in the arse."

The generalised, ego-salving disavowals are issued in a calm, almost detached, manner. The hairy-palmed ravings of my bleakest scenarios fade to memory. Let's get more specific.

Costello alternates gulped mouthfuls of coffee and Perrier, but the word has been around for months now that he's more inclined, significantly more inclined, towards the harder stuff. By the bucketful.

"I've really no idea how people get that impression," he begins, comically wide-eyed with incredulity, "...maybe they're drunk!"

All right, then, have you had a drink problem recently?

"It's like the terrible old joke – I have no drink problem; I drink, I fall down, no problem! I can drink quite a lot, but I don't think it's a problem. I am told, though, the most alarming rumours circulate about me."

Two-bottles-a-day alarming, to be precise.

"That must just be people," he laughs, arms spread wide in a gesture of wonderment, "trying to rationalise the fact that you're not who they expect or want you to be... it's their neuroses, not mine.

"The ludicrous irony is that The Attractions and I were one of the most notorious drinking and indulging bands going, and we got away with it. We had haloes while everybody else had those drug-fiend... the low-life images. We were much weirder than any punk groups, then we all stopped. So in fact, you are five years too late.

"Every couple of weeks or so I still go on a binge and get smashed. But big drinkers? Fuckin' big deal! You're a long time dead..."

Message 'received'; I'll take a raincheck on "Understood". This might be Elvis Costello (shambling wreck of this parish) on a good day; he might also, methinks, be protesting too much or with the zeal of the newly converted, whatever. What's beyond denial is that he looks mightily better than last year's model, a permapissed blob of perspiring plasticine.

"Yeah, but I do go up and down. Alcohol is a debilitating pastime. It's like if someone takes a picture of you after your three-week annual holiday binge, you're not going to look your best. I never actually said I was in the competition to be a pin-up. I'm a celebrity of sorts whether I like it or not, so my appearance is important... So if I get fucked up by being on a spree for a couple of weeks...

"But in my line of work, if you drank all the drinks and took all the drugs you were offered, you would die. Simple as that.

"Look, in eight years, I had three weeks' holiday. So now I have six months without the physical rigours of the road, and I don't look my best. I don't think it's anyone's fucking business if I look shit. I have to face myself in the morning, not them! Then you think, 'Fuck it, I'd better get back into shape.' Also, you just get fed up of the headaches."

He's high on self-defence now, so with Cait still on the loafers trail, I'll push on. The advent of the prettiest (no prizes) Pogue in Costello's affection zone, and the trauma generally associated with such arrivals, is another commonly proffered reason for both Costello's

lengthy absence and his poor shape.

"When I'm not working," he frowns, "people should keep their fucking noses out of my life, y'know."

That's indisputably true. But I still want to know.

"IN MY LINE OF WORK, IF YOU DRANK ALL THE DRINKS AND TOOK ALL THE DRUGS YOU WERE OFFERED, YOU WOULD DIE"
ELVIS COSTELLO

He leans back, staring at the ceiling with an expression he's borrowed from Job.

"Just let me say this to dispel the rumours. My Life Is Great, Official! I don't want to get into a confessional interview, y'know, like Andy Summers' 'Sex Keeps Me Fit At Forty' type bullshit, but at the same time I can't pretend that certain good things aren't going on. So, as I say, life is great.

"In fact, any bad shape I might have appeared to have been in was as likely to have been the result of having too much of a good time."

AH YES, MENTION of people having too much of a good time brings us, with a neatness not normally associated with them, to The Pogues. Costello's relationship with those rum sodomists – his role as producer complicated by his dalliance with Cait – is yet another gushing geyser of gleeful gossip. The sessions that spawned *Rum, Sodomy & The Lash* were characterised, the stories insist, by vitriolic animosity between band and knob-twiddler.

"Groups like The Pogues, groups that are in a class of their own – like the Pistols, from what we hear – can be very cruel, and The Pogues are terribly cruel to one another. When I'm about, the cruelty just transfers to me."

It's an answer typical of this Elvis Costello. Neat, tidy, squeaky clean behind its ears. But its 'no problem' nonchalance doesn't quite fit the facts. When, soon after the launch of *Rum...*, I questioned Shane and Spider Pogue about their producer, the silence was thick as Guinness and accompanied by much staring at feet. Either something was being shiftily avoided or Costello's a thief with a fetish for shoelaces!

And the tales of bad blood and personal abuse of EC – real nasty stuff – continue to simmer away merrily, maliciously.

The explanation, part two: "There's a kind of deprecatory humour between us. They say irreverent things about me which other people find shocking, thinking they should be more respectful. But why the fuck should they?

"If Shane takes the piss out of me for being an old fart or whatever, I ask him how many references to death, rain and canals does his next song have? That's the way Nick Lowe used to deal with us. The studio process is very boring, and that kind of humour helps people to not take it all so fucking seriously."

There he goes again, see, a ready rationalisation always effortlessly to hand. A place for everything and...

The answers come easily, almost too easily. It's a bit like talking to one of those manically moronic *Blue Peter* presenters who, just at the alchemic moment when two egg boxes and a coathanger are to become a fully functioning pocket computer, reach down with practised card-sharp dexterity, and produce the magically finished item. I have one here that I prepared a little earlier.

Quite.

YES, ELVIS, ACTUALLY there is one more thing before we get 'round to the record, one more thing that demands clarification.

Open a copy of Nutty Boys: The Rock Hack's Guide To DIY Psychology and there it is, Chapter Five: Identity Crises. Get this: the words 'Elvis Costello' appear nowhere on 'King Of America'. The spine – the sleeve itself maintaining a deathly hush – credits the record to something called The Costello Show. The songs are written, seemingly, by the firm of Declan, Patrick, Aloysius and MacManus (Costello was christened Declan Patrick MacManus, the Aloysius is a more recent addition). And the inner bag throughout tags the vocalist/guitarist as LHC, The Little Hands Of Concrete.

Add this to his other lives as The Imposter and

With "distinctly chilly presence in the corner" Cait O'Riordan, 1986

a Coward Brother, and the notion – in that much-abused dissection of "Misunderstood" – of a frantic, perhaps irreversible, hacking away of the EC past doesn't seem quite so hysterical.

"There's nothing suspicious there either," begins the man in the clerics robes, wet-blanketing madly, "no drama. The losing of my name is just a little device to remind people that there was always a human being behind the funny glasses. For the first few records it was such an effective guise, a smokescreen for insecurities and a cover for the public learning process that was forced on me. But then I found that people couldn't rid themselves of their preconceptions and kept looking for things on later records that just weren't there.

"Elvis Costello became more and more a character that I played because people wouldn't let him grow up. And so..."

A silence charged with possibility hangs in the space left by the fading away of that last sentence. And so... what? The grinning figure opposite is enjoying his drum-roll dramatic climax, watching me squirm to the unavoidable, hold-the-front-page conclusion. Declan Patrick Aloysius MacManus has, face it, killed Elvis Costello. Like all those unhinged, disbelieving souls outside Graceland nine years ago, I brace myself and mumble the unthinkable. Is Elvis... really... dead?

"In some senses... YES."

In some senses? What does that mean? Is it a death certificate or stay of execution, suspended animation or premature burial. We have no way of knowing, no power to intervene; all that's up to... what the hell do I call him now? Declan?

"Call me what you like."

Right then, Dec it is, like the bloke from The Bachelors who doesn't pay his TV licence fee. But Dec, you know where all this is leading, you know that this mid-career identity-hopping can be taken as a sign of instability – derangement even – in musicians.

Sure, cute and clever David Robert Jones of Brixton, London always knew exactly where the fantasy/reality lines were drawn between himself and Ziggy Stardust, but that coin has another darker side, too. Think of Sly Stone maybe (like the dearly departed Costello, a compositional giant), distracted and eventually destroyed by the war between his Sly/Sylvester Stewart alter egos.

I'm winding him up, and for the first time this Valentine's afternoon, Declan MacManus sneers. It is a sneer unshakably convinced of its own sanity. "That's over-reading things and taking them too seriously again. In many cases, people's psychoses are not an accident but induced by drugs. Sly Stone brought all that shit on himself.

"David Crosby, too. Even his best friends admit he's a hopeless case. Some people are like that, they will kill themselves. Plenty of foolish people do it every day, and lots of people get seriously upset about them, when there's much more deserving people dying every day for much more terrible and stupid reasons. The ones who waste their lives are just brats..."

AND THEN, SOMEWHERE in the head behind the there-but-for-the-grace sneer, an alarm sounds. The shrink session – always a pricey business – is over. He's ready to move on. "What do you think of *King Of America*?"

Now it's my turn to stall, to play for time. After all that's gone on here today, I cannot blithely answer that question.

Having been called 'psychotic', having been laughed at by a man called Little Hands Of Concrete and dressed like Nigel Hawthorne in *The Barchester Chronicles*, and having learned that the great Elvis Costello has been exiled – or worse – by the upstart King Of America, I need time to think. We'll talk about the record next week...

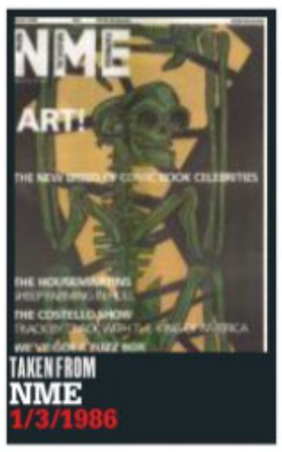
I arrive home – scribblingly noting those vital first-hand impressions, impressions not born of rumour or gossip, of the new king – to find, to my utter amazement, the square yard of mat still mockingly devoid of Valentines.

ESTATE OF KEITH MORRIS/REDFERNS

Costello/MacManus, I scribble, is in far better physical fettle than for some considerable time, displaying no obvious signs of untoward cravings or excessive system abuse. Admittedly, he could just be a good actor, pulling himself together sufficiently to busk his way through a potentially awkward interface, but he does appear to be in pretty good mental trim.

On most of the charges levelled against him, then, we give this opinionated, mercurial prickly enigma, this practising – and mostly getting it right – genius the benefit of the considerable doubt.

Which, with regard to my offending review, leaves only one question naggingly unanswered. Is Elvis Costello/Declan MacManus really such a vindictive bastard that he'd actually *kill* my postman?



"I HAVE NO position in pop now, I resigned my post. I'm not in competition with anyone. The best people are in a class of one, and I'm the best example of what I am...

"Compared to what else's going on today, it's a punk record...." Declan MacManus – his hand on the plug of the life support system that keeps Elvis Costello alive – is selling me his beloved new LP.

"What do you think about *King Of America*?"

I think it's largely wonderful; a vindication of two years out of the racks. It's your most talked about work since *This Year's Model* and your best since *Imperial*...

"That wouldn't be very hard..."

...And, in many ways, among Costello's now 11-deep canon, it's often *different*, sometimes *unique*...

Uniquely, it's downbeat, careful, almost monochrome. The playing – lots of it courtesy of Presley's old spars, the TCB (Taking Care Of Business) crew – is an object lesson in low-key virtuosity.

"I resisted the temptation to grandstand, to drive nails through people's heads. I didn't betray the songs... everything serves them...

Differently, for the first time since *Almost Blue* at least, a Costello record moves with a traditional, timelessly American tread, albeit one minutely flecked by wholemeal forms; country, Irish, and whispers of cajun, zydeco and Tex Mex.

"We eschewed the current production fascism which dictates that all drums have to sound like cannon fire, all tambourines have to sound like saxophones, and so on...

"But these songs aren't folk. I'd just seen two perfect hit singles by The Pogues fail because the radio doesn't play 'folk'. And they're like a punk group compared to one guy with an acoustic guitar.

"Anyway, I'm a pop writer..."

Uniquely, ...*America*'s torrent of words are unambiguous. Well, as unambiguous as Costello's come. The patented baroque linguistic card tricks are largely gone, replaced by a simultaneously discomforting – the shock of the new – and cockle-warming directness.

"A couple of years ago my writing was sort of short-circuiting and slipping into those wordplay things, at which I'm quite good. It was all becoming pretty glib – I thought I'd have to start using less words. There's not too many words... this is the clearest lyrical record I've ever made. I used the number that I needed..."

Uniquely, the new record is largely without wickedness, acrimony, spite, bile or spleen. It is devoid of acid.

"I took it out. I want *King*... to be a more loving record than my usual. It sounds pompous, but I want good critics to use words like 'compassionate', 'humane', 'generous'..."

Differently, for the first time since his debut, in fact, Costello has cut himself away from the umbilical security of The Attractions.

"Obviously, I couldn't assume an emotional rapport with the new band. It was like a football team really; they stood around while I went through the songs, explaining everything – even my colloquialisms – to ensure that the meanings were clear. I was as honest with them as I could be...

"They came along with very few prejudices, very open-minded and hearted. They didn't say 'Who's this weirdo, then?'..."

Uniquely, guitarist James Burton finds his often-wondrous, country-tinged playing twinkling with absurd ease behind the voice of a strange chap called Elvis... for the second time.

"In all honesty, I was just as thrilled to be playing with James because he'd worked with Gram Parsons! The good thing was that they talked about Elvis as a musician, just the singer in a band. They didn't have him up on some pedestal. After all the sleaze it was very pleasing to listen to people with fond memories, funny little stories to tell, y'know."

Did they take the piss?

"Only joking asides... it wasn't as if I turned up wearing a gold lamé suit or acting weird..."

And *very* differently, a major pop writer is prepared, anxious even, to talk about his record without recourse to the usual battery of excuses, temperamentalities, get-outs and cosy generalities. "I desperately want a fair hearing for this record, not to have people misread it... Everything you *don't* understand on it is *exactly* what it appears to be..."

KING OF AMERICA'S pair of outright rockers ("LOVABLE" – "It's mostly straight, but isn't love tricky?" – and "EISENHOWER BLUES" – "A satirical blues, anyone who can't see why I recorded it is an idiot!") are self-explanatory, which leaves...

"BRILLIANT MISTAKE", opening proceedings and setting a sparkling standard for the rest of the LP, concerns itself with The Big Country.

"America? No place on Earth has ever been based on such high principles; principles that have either been betrayed or used to beat people around the head with.

"This country, by comparison, has no constitutional morality yet people would still view America as being more unjust. But that's a huge argument, beyond the scope of this song. I simply chose three little scenes to illustrate America The Brilliant Mistake. It's not the last word... nothing on this record is the last word."

"You're not gonna do a thing to"

..."OUR LITTLE ANGEL" is a country slide, a distanced view of a Costello mainstay, the coquette.

"It's just a story of a tease, a flirt tolerated by a bunch of hangers-on, deflecting the more genuine feelings of ardent suitors. You know the scene, everybody does. It's small and trivial."

And certainly a close relative of "You Little Fool"...

"Ah, but that was a far sicker song."

"Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood!" – some bloody hope!

"Beneath The Animals' thuggish version, there was always another song in there. The reason I put it out as a single was to get across the very different sound of the LP. I have got some sympathy with the lyric, but not in any desperate way. Perhaps the voice misled people. I had a terrible throat that day, but I kinda liked the effect."

"GLITTER GULCH" tackles the eat-your-own-shit-on-air-and-we'll-fly-you-to-Disneyland quiz-cum-torture shows.

EC, '86: "Losing my name is a device to remind people there was always a human behind the funny glasses"

DEREK RIDGERS

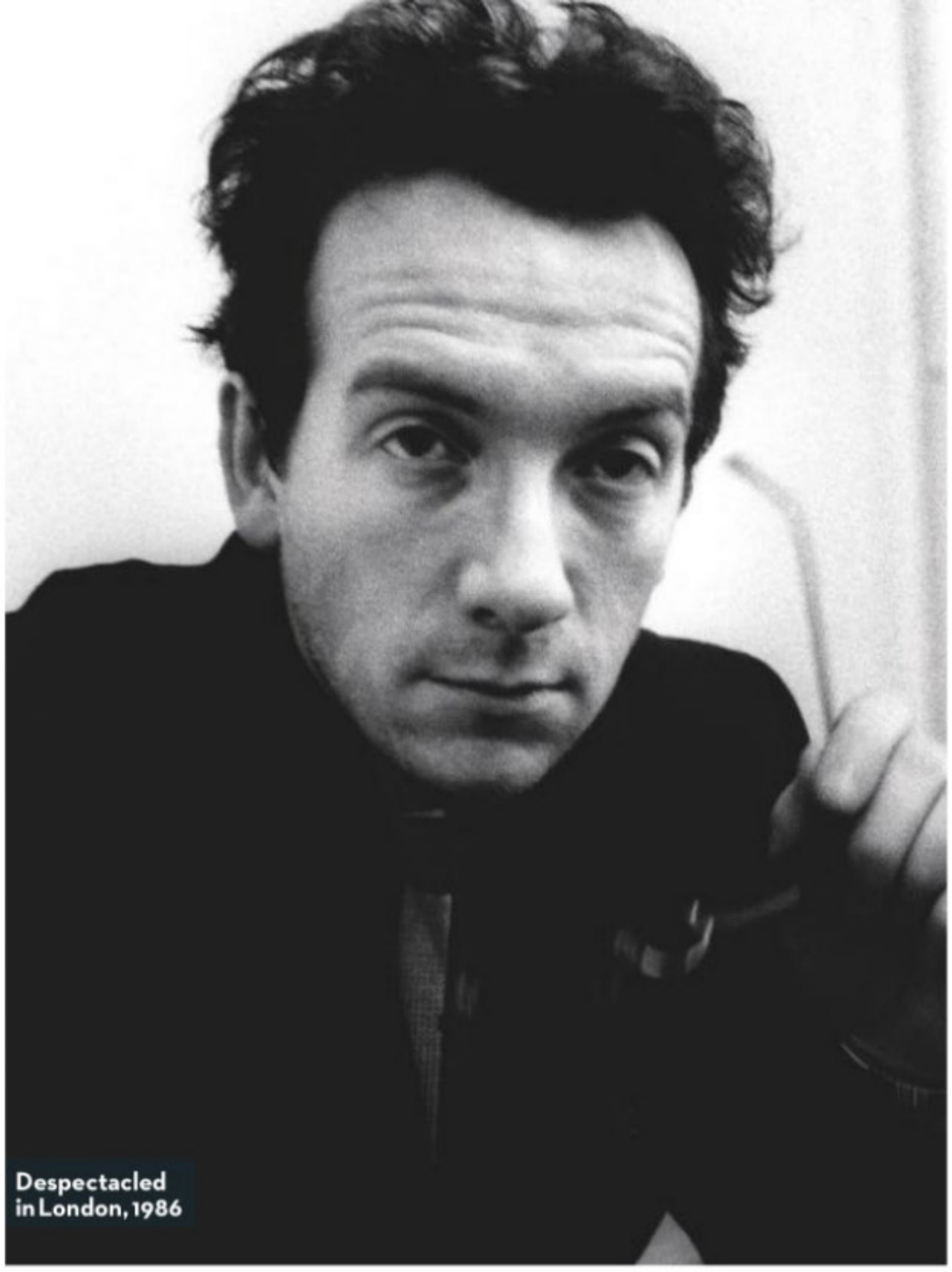
"It's a throwaway song about throwaway culture. I didn't want to get all earnest about it... they're absurd and ludicrous, sure, but I didn't want to get all moralist about them. They present both laughable and tragic elements..."

Skeletal, almost unaccompanied, and ...*America*'s second Rolls-Royce, "INDOOR FIREWORKS" is love on a tinderbox, sex its continual spark. It's one of the LP's most personal songs, the writer stripped bare.

"It is the saddest song on the record, and exactly what it appears to be."

What, even the line *"It's time to tell the truth/My fuse is burning out"*?

A wink and a knowing laugh: "It's exactly what it appears to be..."



Despectacled in London, 1986

"LITTLE PALACES", JUST agonised vocal, mandolin and acoustic bass, is a chilling, raw-powerful, *vérité* vignette of inner-city ills from lousy shoebox housing to savage violence against kids. Certainly one of the most expressive (and bitter) songs Costello's ever written, it may also emerge as one of his most problematic and controversial.

"Some people might even take offence because it's not waving the flag for the working class, but fuck it, there's plenty of others doing that already...

"It's a personal song, not sociological. My grandfather lived all his life in a house that was condemned; condemned from before the First World War 'til the day he died. But at least that place was solidly built – they knocked down many like it to build flats that were demolished 15 years ago because they were made with so little regard for human life that they turned into fucking shit. And if you put people into shit, they turn into shit, too!

"But there's a falsehood in thinking people morally superior because of their background. All upper-class people are not bastards, all coppers are not bastards, and all working-class people are not good. Some of them are stupid and vicious.

"All right, some of those are made to be stupid and vicious, but there's no fucking excuse when women are raped, when kids' heads get knocked in – they're stupid, brutal people."

After that little lot, and the profound resignation of "Fireworks", Wagner would come as light relief. Happily, then, Side One's closer, "I'LL WEAR IT PROUDLY", another act of devotion, is a relief, welcome and (de)light(ful).

"It's the most straightforward love song I could write at this moment."

Straightforward? Even the line about gladly wearing the crown of *"the King of Fools"*?

"Well yes, it's a song in which I'm hiding nothing, qualifying nothing..."

Side Two shoves off with "AMERICAN WITHOUT TEARS", a companion piece to "Brilliant Mistake".

"It's basically a true story about two GI brides that I met in the States. They were wonderful. They had it, and lots of it!

"In many ways, there's nothing worse than English people living in the USA, especially Los Angeles. They've all got *Spinal Tap* accents, terribly exaggerated South London accents like Mick Jagger, nowworrameen?

"The virulent anti-American racism in this country makes me sick and sad. That a country's foreign policy and an admittedly idiotic president can damn 200 million people is mad, utterly mad. Those ideas – that they're all stupid and have too much money – are just crap!

"I HAVE NO POSITION IN POP NOW, I RESIGNED MY POST. I'M NOT IN COMPETITION WITH ANYONE..."

ELVIS COSTELLO

"People now tell me that it's got political overtones, that the song's about cultural imperialism, but... it's simply that there are people who go there, accept, and are accepted."

The achingly beautiful "POISONED ROSE" is country enough to have made *Almost Blue*, but it's crafted by veteran jazzers like string bassist Ray Brown.

"I was very nervous, intimidated almost, about working with Ray and those guys. Their musical stories are all Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, so you start to wonder what the hell you're doing there, whether you're up to it. You start to have nightmares that you're just indulging some faddish whim...

"The song, again, is what it seems, a love song. Pain doesn't always have to be major, crushing pain – it can be like picking up something beautiful, a rose, and getting it stuck in your hand..."

Costello's repeated recent denials of a boozelogged 1985 render "THE BIG LIGHT" less sodden with meaning than might have been the case.

"Yeah," he laughs, "you were waiting to hear how I wrote it in the Betty Ford Clinic! It's like a humorous Merle Haggard song made special by the Las Vegas playing!

"Hangovers are just a trivial matter, until the few hours when you've got 'em. *Then* it's a matter of life and fuckin' death!"

"'JACK OF ALL PARADES' is totally straightforward, another simple love song."

Come off it, it seems choked with images weighing Personal Happiness against Fame...

"All those theories about the rigours of fame and all that are overblown. Obviously there are some wasted opportunities and squandered emotions in there, but they're..." he strikes his breast (Catholic public confession style), "through my fault, through my own fault..."

Oh, don't let's start all that.

"SUIT OF LIGHTS" more than once bears the line *"I went to work last night, and wasted my breath"*. The song has been widely interpreted (ironically, it's the album's sole employment for The Attractions) as MacManus's murder weapon in The Case Of The Missing Bespectacled Pop Star.

"To an extent, that's true. A suit of lights? They're those incredibly gaudy, dazzling, uniforms matadors wear. But they hide and obscure things, too. Like an Elvis Costello mask..."

Declan MacManus got tired of his suit of lights, tired of going to work each night and wasting his breath.

"SLEEP OF THE JUST" – a lilting Poguesian air, armed with an inbuilt sideswipe at Madonna – closes *King Of America* with a suitable flourish. It's the second side's fourth ace, this resurrectional record's *ninth* in all.

"It's a construction from an actual event. The opening verse happened to me, but not the rest. It's just a little story about morally superior prigs. This one – a soldier, by coincidence – thinks he's better than his nude model sister. It's a parable, about pride, about pomposity..."

"So what do you think about the record?"

Boggle-eyed, brilliant, flawed, slightly unhinged, free of the sharpened elbows of its predecessors so you can cuddle up to it if you want. And I do, though I'll leave close encounters with MacManus himself to braver souls.

Oh, the record? 'America' The Beautiful!

ESTATE OF KEITH MORRIS/REDFERNS

BLOOD & CHOCOLATE

Napoleon Dynamite returns to his embittered old cohorts for one more nasty, explosive set. "You basically just wanted to strangle the bastard!" BY GRAEME THOMSON

RELEASED SEPTEMBER 15, 1986

BARELY SIX MONTHS after the finely etched songcraft of *King Of America* had suggested an artist in the throes of elegant reinvention, *Blood & Chocolate* arrived to subvert any notions that Elvis Costello might be easing into the armchair of respectability. Shorn of his beard and much of *King Of America*'s warmth and tenderness, Costello returned in the guise of Napoleon Dynamite with a song so primitive it had been written by banging his palms on a kitchen table and shouting what passed for a melody into a tape recorder.

"Uncomplicated" is the perfect introduction to *Blood & Chocolate*, an album of vandal rock'n'roll, primal mono-rhythms, blunt-force attacks and words that take a masochistic delight in aggravating exposed emotional nerve-endings. Compared to the airy Hollywood professionalism of the *King Of America* sessions, *Blood & Chocolate* has the mood of a dysfunctional family summit in the back room of a West London bookie's, the atmosphere thick with unpleasant home truths and festering resentments.

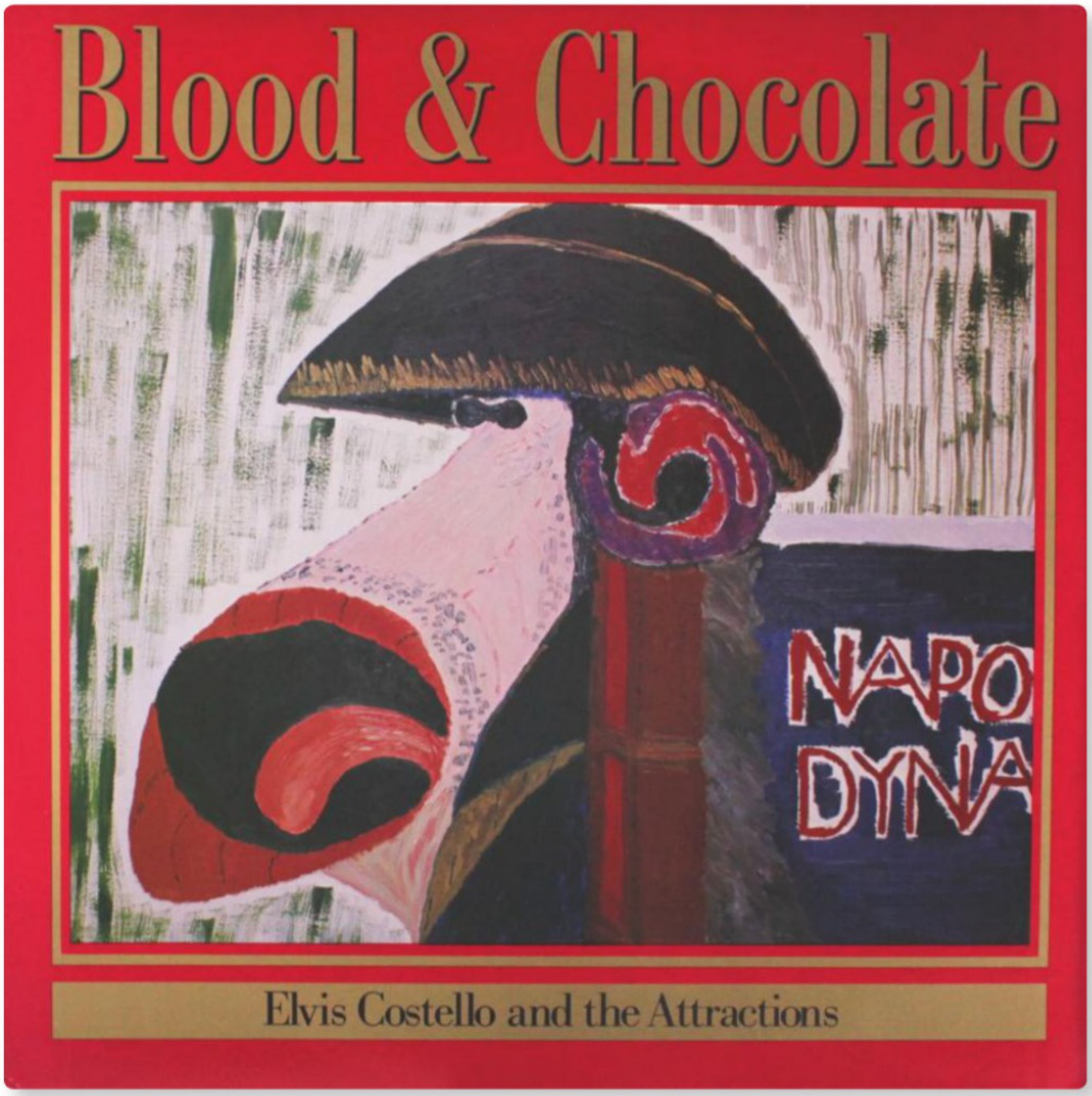
On the surface, the return of The Attractions and Nick Lowe, producing for the first time since *Get Happy!!*, seemed to signal a retreat to first principles. The rich, chiming carnival pop of "I Hope You're Happy Now", "Blue Chair", "Crimes Of Paris" and "Next Time Round" is certainly a continuation of a theme begun on *This Year's Model* and evolved through the likes of "Accidents Will Happen", "Temptation" and "Man Out Of Time". But, in general, this is a darker take on Costello's bedrock sound. *Blood & Chocolate* revisits the template of his classic early albums with almost 10 years' worth of musical experience and interpersonal resentment in the bank, and the results border on the murderous.

Convening between March and May at Olympic Studios, Costello used the tensions between his morale-drained band and their singer to stoke the performances. "He created situations where you basically just wanted to strangle the bastard," bassist Bruce Thomas recalled. "I suppose it was an artistic device."

The four musicians set up as they would at a concert, playing loud and live through a stage PA, with no screens for separation. Microphones were dotted around the huge studio, an anti-technique that often renders The Attractions as blunt and brutal as a club. Each song was done in two or three takes and overdubs were minimal. Costello's girlfriend, Pogues bassist Cait O'Riordan, contributes vocals here and there, Lowe adds a touch of Akoustika Guitaro (all the sleeve credits are, naturally, written in Esperanto), but precious little air is allowed into the room. The textures of the title are apt. This is thick, dark, sticky stuff.

Musically, *Blood & Chocolate* possesses all the ugly drama of a final reckoning. Lyrically, it's pained and personal, albeit shot through with pitch-black humour. A remarkable number of songs concern three-way love affairs, some of which end more happily than others. "Honey, Are You Straight Or Are You Blind?" is a brief, fractured snapshot of a ménage à trois in which a female interloper is turning his girlfriend's head: "*She's coming in between us, you know that she is*," Costello sings with a raised eyebrow. In the cantering "Next Time Round", "*she's in the bedroom with that boy of hers*" while Costello is stranded on the landing and seems, frankly, out of his depth.

"I Hope You're Happy Now", on the other hand, is played largely for laughs. Costello takes a swipe at an ex and her hapless new beau, portrayed as the fall guy from some ludicrous '70s sitcom, with "*his turquoise pyjamas and motorcycle hat*". "Blue Chair" examines



THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"The music is great to listen to – a rich organic sound, miles superior to the overlit and picked-out production on the last LP with The Attractions, *Goodbye Cruel World*. It treads a fine line between sounding earthy and sounding muddy. The obvious reference point is Dylan..."
SIMON REYNOLDS, MELODY MAKER, SEPTEMBER 13, 1986

"If *Blood & Chocolate* represents a return of sorts to the grit and bile that marked Costello's early albums, it is a welcome return to a tough streak that has been underplayed since the turn of the decade. This is the most stark, honest record that Costello has made since *Trust*. It is more Birthday Suit than Emperor's New Clothes."
ADRIAN THRILLS, NME, SEPTEMBER 13, 1986

a similarly triangular affair with a little more heart and poetic obfuscation, buttonholing a love rival who might have won the battle but, it seems, is going to lose the war.

Yet when Costello's defences finally crumble, they do so on an epic scale. "Home Is Anywhere You Hang Your Head" feels so spectacularly sorry for itself from its opening line – "*Here comes Mr Misery*" – it could have been written while staring hungover into the mirror. Its gloomy preoccupation with love soured is a mere palate-cleanser, however, for the full-blown horrors of "I Want You", in which Costello's infamous revenge-and-guilt ethos is taken to sado-masochistic, possibly psychopathic extremes.

Over almost seven minutes he's ensnared by blurred visions of the object of his obsession and another man. He is by turns chilling, vulnerable, pleading, pathetic, stalkerish: "*I'm afraid I won't know where to stop.*" Around these slow-burning obsessions, The Attractions roll out a heavy, concentric groove, descending deeper and deeper into the morass, stopping off only for Costello to deliver a truly deranged two-note guitar solo. For the final 60 seconds the band are leaking through the singer's microphone, a ghostly counterpoint to his whispered confessions.

If "I Want You" documents a troubling personal apocalypse, "Tokyo Storm Warning" is a global one. Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" rebooted for the fresh hell of Thatcherism, it's a six-minute pan-global nightmare vision of a world run to ruin. Over a loose Bo Diddley beat and The Attractions' churning block of noise, Costello sweeps from the "*monster movie scenery*" of Japan to an Alabaman Ku Klux Klan convention, the Heysel stadium disaster, the Folies Bergère and the "Costa Del Malvinas".

Like several of these songs, it's essentially a turbo-charged blues, the reliance on repetitive rhythm and minimal chord changes suggesting that Costello wants nothing fancy coming between him and his intimations of disaster. "Poor Napoleon", too, is spare and sulphurous, and its preoccupations darkly familiar. Halfway through this hesitant, bass-heavy tale of sex and murder, Costello asks a question that seems to sum up the mood of the record: "*Did you ever think there's far too many people in the world?*"

Ten years into his recording career, *Blood & Chocolate* was a rather glorious exercise in creative tunnel vision. It's also a smudgy full stop, marking the end of his deal with Columbia Records, the end of the road with The Attractions and the last hurrah for a certain kind of scorched sensibility and sound. It's a record that does one thing tremendously well. On the next, he would try to do everything all at once.

TRACKMARKS BLOOD & CHOCOLATE

1. Uncomplicated ★★★★
2. I Hope You're Happy Now ★★★★
3. Tokyo Storm Warning ★★★★★
4. Home Is Anywhere You Hang Your Head ★★★★
5. I Want You ★★★★★
6. Honey, Are You Straight Or Are You Blind? ★★★
7. Blue Chair ★★★★
8. Battered Old Bird ★★
9. Crimes Of Paris ★★★
10. Poor Napoleon ★★★★
11. Next Time Round ★★★★

Label: Demon
Produced by: Nick Lowe and Colin Fairley
Recorded at: Olympic Studios, London

Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitar, bass, harmonium), Steve Nieve (organ, piano, harmonium), Pete Thomas (drums), Bruce Thomas (bass guitar), Cait O'Riordan (backing vocals), Nick Lowe (acoustic guitar)
Highest chart position: UK 16; US 84

SPIKE

Irish folk? New Orleans funk? Americana? A Costello/McCartney dream team? The Beloved Entertainer stretches out… BY NEIL SPENCER

RELEASED FEBRUARY 6, 1989

AS THE 1980s dwindled, Elvis Costello found himself in the unusual position of not knowing what to do next. Amid a host of plans and projects, which was the one to pursue? By the end of 1987, his protracted break-up with The Attractions was (more or less) completed, while he had slotted in international dates with The Confederates. His marriage to Cait O'Riordan was still in its honeymoon and Costello was much in the orbit of The Pogues, with whom O'Riordan played bass. Further, he had been working with Paul McCartney, who had proposed the pair write an album together. By the start of 1988, he was also penning the soundtrack for *The Courier*, an Irish film that featured O'Riordan in its cast.

Costello was in truth all over the place, his restlessness and dissatisfaction with his career arc reflected in the welter of soubriquets he had adopted over the previous couple of years, and in his ceaseless changes of musical approach. Was this desperation in the guise of a questing spirit, or simply a loss of direction?

Both, actually. As he considered his first album for a new label, Warners, Costello's head swam with ideas. Apparently convinced that any genre was his for the taking, he envisaged a series of four, even five albums. There would be another Americana record with Coward Brother T Bone Burnett, a venture into New Orleans territory with some of the Crescent City's finest, yet another using the Irish folk flavours he enjoyed with The Pogues, and then a more mainstream pop album, possibly the McCartney project…

What emerged from these grand visions was *Spike*, a diffuse sprawl across genres, a fascinating and sometimes inspired collection that refused to become more than the sum of its parts. Its uncertainty is there in a cover shot of Costello in clown greasepaint – or is it music hall demon? – with 'The Beloved Entertainer' inscribed below, yet another toyed-with alias, as if any but the most ardent Ellophile cared what nom de plume was currently in favour. It was all Costello, after all.

Not quite. *Spike* was the first Costello album with co-composer credits – a brace with McCartney, another with O'Riordan. It also boasts a giddy array of guests clustered around each of its several recording locations. The aristocracy of Irish folk graced the Dublin sessions – Donal Lunny, Davy Spillane, Christy Moore. The LA studios drew Roger McGuinn, Mitchell Froom, Marc Ribot, Jim Keltner, with co-producer T Bone Burnett also lending a hand. New Orleans provided The Dirty Dozen Brass Band under the supervision of soul maestro Allen Touusaint. Back home there was a near-duet to be sung with Chrissie Hynde, and of course, somewhere, Nick Lowe was on bass. The sessions were a logistical jigsaw, with parts recorded in one city and augmented elsewhere. But if scattered, *Spike* was also fearless, Costello putting himself among the top brass of his profession.

Could he rise to the various occasions? Mostly. Opener "This Town" unrolls grandly with a chiming chorus of "*You're nobody in this town until you're a bastard*", with intriguing vignettes of modern-day bastardry in its verses. "Deep Dark Truthful Mirror", a potentially awkward mid-tempo piece of finger-pointing, is leant gravitas by Toussaint's rippling piano and the growls of the Dirty Dozen Brass. There's a wry joy to the cabaret of "Miss Macbeth", with its Beatlesesque Wurlitzer, while the actual Beatle presence delivers a highlight – and much-needed hit single – in "Veronica". Costello provided the song, about an old lady drifting into absent-mindedness, more or less intact, but Macca's added chorus swirls the song upwards into exuberance. The pair's other

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"*Spike* is a bold move... it's an exciting, inspiring, bewildering and bloody frightening record which could well be regarded as his most accomplished yet... It grapples with Lou Reed's *New York* as the most complete pop statement about our sick little earth." TERRY STAUNTON, NME, FEBRUARY 11, 1989

"*Spike* proves that Costello is still the finest wordsmith we have, his only serious challenger being Morrissey. This album is thoughtful, furious, eloquent, witty and angry. It's Elvis Costello." DAVE JENNINGS, MELODY MAKER, FEBRUARY 11, 1989

co-write, "Pads, Paws And Claws", is a less fortunate affair, a nondescript neo-rockabilly that never gets past its title.

Best of all comes "Tramp The Dirt Down", an elegant excursion into Irish balladry, simply and sweetly played by the doyens of the craft, cradling one of Costello's most vitriolic tirades, aimed not at a lover but at Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Costello's revulsion at the sight of the baby-kissing Iron Lady triggered the song, which contrasts her smiles with the miseries inflicted by her policies: "*I never thought that human life could be so cheap*". Reflecting a widespread loathing for her regime, its sentiments are delivered drily, or at least as dry as hoping to stamp on someone's grave can get. Only towards the end does Costello's voice crack with bile. Heaven knows what the world made of it, but in Eire and Albion the cheers rang. True to his word, Costello continued to sing the number after Thatcher's death in 2013.

"Any King's Shilling" allows the Celtic contingent more space to stretch out musically, and they produce a majestic arrangement for one of Costello's most impassioned vocals, cautioning a young man against "*putting your silly head in that British soldier's hat*"; it could as easily belong to the 'troubles' of the 1920s as the 1980s.

Yet for every triumph on *Spike* there is a so-so counterweight. "Chewing Gum" is a stab at funk that's too strong for Costello's reedy vocals. "Satellite", with Chrissie Hynde backing, struggles to establish a clear identity. "Last Boat Leaving", written for *The Courier*, is a pleasant plod. "Let Him Dangle", about the last man to be hanged in Britain, is a well-meant polemic against the death penalty but one that, chorus aside, comes melody-free. "God's Comic", cut from the same cloth as Randy Newman"s "God's Song", has some droll lines – EC imagines The Almighty listening to Lloyd Webber's *Requiem* and remarking "*I preferred the one about my Son*" – but its conceit and mock jaunty arrangement soon outwear their novelty.

Then there's "Stalin Malone", a beautifully played instrumental from The Dirty Dozen Brass, intricate yet catchy. Costello seems to have realised that fitting in an equally elaborate set of lyrics – sample: "*the jazz band drowns out the hysterical bird*" – would be inviting trouble, so the track stays gamely but oddly a stand-alone. One might say the same of *Spike* as a whole; among Costello's huge output it's a one-off in its diversity, and if its contents don't quite coalesce, its stand-outs and bravery still shine.

TRACKMARKS SPIKE

1. This Town ★★★★
2. Let Him Dangle ★★★
3. Deep Dark Truthful Mirror ★★★★
4. Veronica ★★★★
5. God's Comic ★★★
6. Chewing Gum ★★★
7. Tramp The Dirt Down ★★★★★
8. Stalin Malone ★★★
9. Satellite ★★★
10. Pads, Paws And Claws ★★★
11. Baby Plays Around ★★★★
12. Miss Macbeth ★★★
13. Any King's Shilling ★★★★
14. Coal Train Robberies ★★★
15. Last Boat Leaving ★★★

Label: Warner Brothers
Produced by: EC, Kevin Killen, T Bone Burnett
Recorded at: Ocean Way, LA; Southbank, New Orleans; Windmill, Dublin; AIR, London
Personnel includes: Costello (vcs, gtr), Paul McCartney (bs), Chrissie Hynde (vcs), Roger McGuinn (gtr, bs), T Bone Burnett (gtr, bs), Jerry Scheff, Nick Lowe (bs), Marc Ribot (gtr), Mitchell Froom (keys), Jim Keltner (drums), Allen Toussaint (piano), Donal Lunny (gtr), Davy Spillane (pipes), Christy Moore (bodhran)
Highest chart position: UK 5; US 32

"It's an accolade. It means you're still getting up somebody's fuckin' nose."

One last wild night for old time's sake, as Elvis Costello and ALLAN JONES set the world to rights over a drink or 20 in Dublin. To be discussed: the strung-out years of the early '80s, the selling of *Spike*, the failure of political pop and his vicious anti-Thatcher tirade, "Tramp The Dirt Down". "I'm not a mug. I've been doing this for 12 fuckin' years. I know how to speak now, thank you..."

TAKEN FROM MELODY MAKER 13/5/1989

THE BELOVED ENTERTAINER answers my call to his room with a croak. He's not up yet. I'm not surprised. We've been up most of the night, drinking our fool heads off at a party celebrating the Irish Music Awards. We'd driven back to Dublin in the haunted hours before dawn, drunk and rowdy, no doubt convinced we were having the time of our lives. This morning we feel like death, of course, bones growing out of our heads, tongues turning to chalk, hoarse-voiced and delirious.

On the phone now, to Costello, in the lobby of his hotel, I'm shaking, wracked by nausea, chills and fever. Costello sounds as bad as I feel, which is as bad as it gets. He asks for 15 minutes to pull himself together. I tell him we'll give him 30 and meet him in the bar, where Sheehan and I have beers for breakfast. Costello joins us, looking like his heels have dragged him all night across scrubland, naked. We all proceed to feel very sorry for ourselves, and then we go up to Costello's room, heads still pounding, every nerve end flayed and twitching.

We talk late into the afternoon, too tired almost to quit. Drinks keep arriving. Pretty soon, I'm getting drunk again. We try to remember when either of us last felt quite so bad, and Costello remembers when it was always like this for him — endless tours, fuelled by drugs and too much booze, every day a hangover, a stumbling through entire seasons, strung out on alcohol and narcotics; hell, after the novelty had worn off, leaving only the habit and the debris.

TOM SHEEHAN

Costello in 1989: "You can think too fuckin' much, you know, and it gets a bit fuckin' evil..."

"I really thought all that nonsense had reached a kind of peak when we were in Holland doing *Get Happy!!*," Costello says, his voice chipped at the edges with exhaustion, "when we were literally writing songs on the way to the studio from the bar. But later, it was just as bad. Probably worse. When we were in Nashville for *Almost Blue*, there was a film crew with us, making that *South Bank Show* documentary. While they were filming, it was all very serious, and I'd be making all these ponderous statements about why I was making this country album, which everyone seemed to think was a completely lunatic thing to be doing. But as soon as the cameras stopped rolling, it was 'Right — more drugs, where are the fuckin' drinks?' Screaming our bloody heads off, because we were just so completely fuckin' out of it.

"A lot of people think that album sounds so depressed because I was drinking so much at the time. But there were other things that contributed to that, things were happening in my private life that I don't really want to talk about. It wasn't just drinking. I mean, I was drinking a lot in fuckin' '78. But I was having a better time then. It's when you're drinking and you're not happy, that's when you've got to worry. That's when it's gonna affect the way you look at things, because you're probably drinking for the wrong reasons. And that's when things start to get warped and you don't think anything through.

"I remember Nick Lowe once said to me, he said, 'You know, I just don't understand you. You fight every drink or any drugs you take. You fight them all the time. You're trying to stay straight all the way through it.' And I still do it. I'll never admit that I'm drunk. But we all drink. And sometimes it's for the right reasons... to let your mind off the leash for a while, and have a bit of fun, and then you don't mind if you make a bit of a prat of yourself, like last night. And it doesn't matter if you end up shouting at people, or have a punch-up or whatever, as long as you wake up the same person. It's when you don't want to wake up the same person that you've got a problem.

"And I think I maybe went through that for a while. There were times when I'd feel every moment as bad as I do this morning. Times when you'd wake up feeling like you were knocking on heaven's fuckin' door and there'd be nobody there to fuckin' answer you. Those were the worst times..."

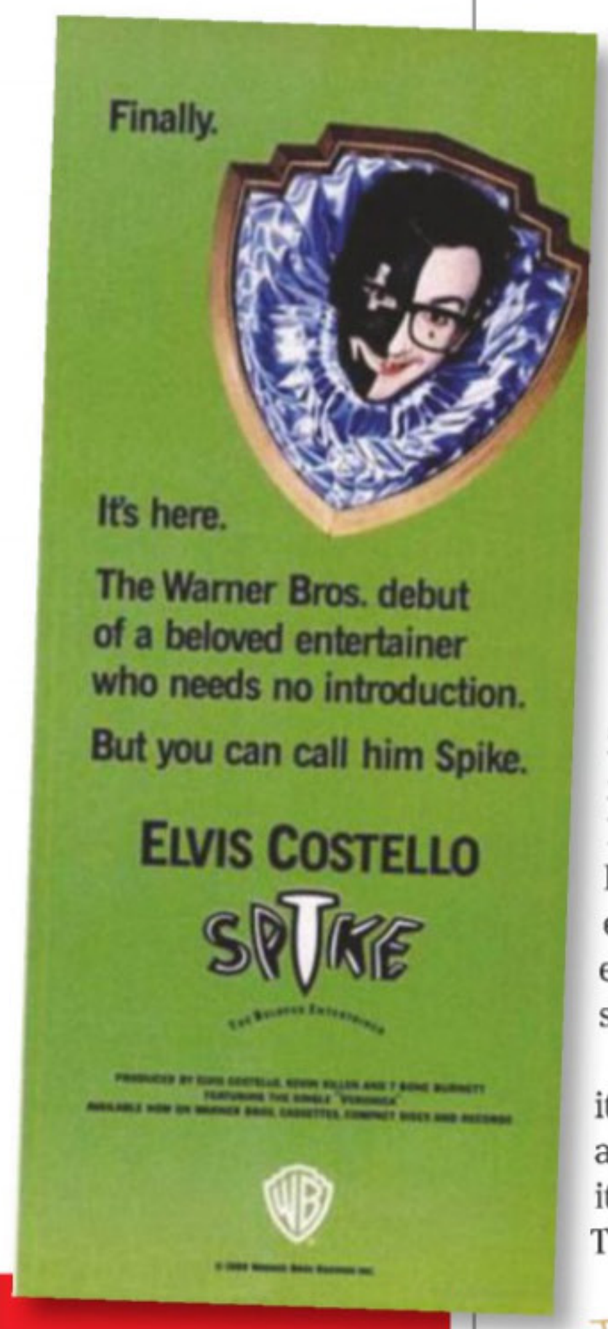
THERE WAS A general feeling back then that you were purposely fucking up your life to give you material for your songs.

"I think I did that for about a year," Costello says, tired now and showing it. "At the very most. And then I began to mistrust the results. Because if you do that, it's like when they pour acid in rabbits' eyes or something. What does it prove? It proves that it hurts the animal. Very smart. It's unnecessary research. And I guess I did some unnecessary research for a while. And then I'd write something that would scare the hell out of me... Like, there's a couple of things on *Get Happy!!* that, when I read them back, I just scared the hell out of myself. And I thought, 'Uh-uh... better not think any more about this... it's going too far...' Because you can think too fuckin' much, you know, and it gets a bit fuckin' evil."

Did you ever during this period think you were going too far, becoming too personal, too explicit, pouring too much venom, rage and spite into your songs?

"Maybe in retrospect... I can recognise sometimes where I maybe went over the line. But then again, I was never really that specific. I mean, people who really do pay too much attention for their own good have tried to peg certain songs to certain people. It's like a game, isn't it, that started in the early '70s with people like Joni Mitchell. People always wanted to know who those songs were about. And people have tried that with me, and it's always been wrong.

"The fact is, those songs were never merely confessional... Even if you're satisfying your own selfish desire to put somebody down in a song or praise them, it isn't important that everybody knows who you're writing about or the specific emotional situation that provoked it. The song should have a universal appeal, otherwise it doesn't serve any purpose. It becomes merely self-indulgent. Like, 'Let me tell you some more secrets about myself...' It's all me me me. And that just gets really fuckin' painful after a while. But then you get people saying, 'Well at least it's honest.' But is it? Is it honest to go around going, 'Look at my open sores'? I don't think it is. I think it's just fuckin' indulgent."



"IS IT HONEST TO GO AROUND GOING, 'LOOK AT MY OPEN SORES'? I DON'T THINK IT IS. IT'S JUST FUCKIN' INDULGENT"
ELVIS COSTELLO

Do you feel resentful, then, that people still dig through the bones of your songs, looking for the explicitly autobiographical in your writing?

"No, I don't resent it," Costello laughs, setting off a bout of wheezing. "Just blame John Lennon. It's the *Plastic Ono Band*, that album started it all. After that, everything was supposed to be fuckin' confessional. The early '70s were full of all these people baring their fuckin' souls for public scrutiny. There were records whose authenticity depended on the confessional aspect, and if you read certain magazines and the background interviews, you knew who these songs were about.

"And that for me always used to spoil it. Particularly when you found out what dickheads some of the people were that they were writing about. I'd rather have them be like Smokey Robinson songs, which could be about anyone. I don't think it's important that people know who 'Alison' was actually about. It's none of their fuckin' business. It's a song. 'I Want You' is a song. It doesn't matter who it's about... "

People still automatically assume it's addressed to Cait...

"Yeah," he says wearily. "But it's just nonsense. It's just a song. It's a really well-written song. It's also very personal, but you don't have to know the whole story to be touched by it... It's like people might say this new record is less personal because most of it's written in the third person. That's just as misguided. It all came out of my head, so how can it not be personal, you know... But there are still people, yeah, who want everything I've done documented and explained... but we're really getting into something else here.

"Like I say, it's all in the past... none of it means a damn. You can't go digging around forever in the past. It's history. Let it go. It's what I'm doing now that counts. That's what I want people to realise."

WE WERE IN Dublin to talk about *Spike*, as if it hadn't been talked about enough already. The album arrived in February, in a blizzard of promotional activity unprecedented in Costello's career. For the first couple of weeks of the album's release, he was everywhere. You couldn't pick up a magazine, turn on the radio or television without finding Costello waxing lyrical about the record.

It got to the point eventually where all this public salesmanship seemed evidence almost of a desperate attempt by Costello to revive an interest in himself and his work, increasingly marginalised in the '80s, and to recapture the commercial ground he'd lost after the enormous commercial success of *Armed Forces* in 1979. There were times, though, when his cheerful bluster seemed positively ingratiating.

"I certainly didn't feel that way," Costello bristles when this is brought up. "I think it's important to remember that the last 10 years with Columbia in America were often really frustrating. They just didn't know how to promote us. They'd run out of ideas. And by the end, I think they'd just given up, especially after *King Of America*, which they didn't have a fuckin' clue what to do with, and *Blood &*

EC in Dublin, '89: "I was getting thrown out of folk clubs 20 years ago..."

Chocolate, which they hated and subsequently just fuckin' buried.

"So this was our first one with Warner Brothers, and obviously you've got to accept the fact that the record company has nothing but horror stories from the past about you, and I simply didn't want to get off on the wrong foot with them and end up having to go through the same old fuckin' battles just to get a fuckin' record in the shops.

"So when the impetus came from America for me to promote the album, I said I'd do it. There was nothing ingratiating about it. As for being desperate – you can't force people to put you on the covers of magazines or on the television or the radio or whatever. That was their choice. And it just proves to me how fuckin' dull everything must be right now, if someone with my tenure in the business can just reappear after three years and get that kind of attention. I mean, it's no big fuckin' deal.

"But it amazed me, the ease with which on the one hand you can come back and command the centre stage, just by saying you're there, and secondly still be regarded as somewhat outrageous. But what else is happening? In England, there's a cult a week for some band that's gonna save us all, and then you never fuckin' hear of them again. It's very easy and I suppose attractive to get excited and emotional about The Darling Buds or somebody. But after a while, you can't keep up with who's the latest flame.

"And who's outrageous any more? Like I was just in a radio station somewhere in America, in the South, quite a mainstream station. And this guy said, 'Sometimes I just have to let my hair down and get outta here, go over to my old college station and play as much Nick Heyward as I like!' And with all due respect to Nick, he's no Jimmy Reed. I mean, I think Nick Heyward's made a couple of nice records, but he's not the wild man of rock'n'roll. But he was this guy's definition of outrageous... And if that's indicative of the present climate, it's maybe not so curious that I still get some attention. And it's maybe why anything I do, not so much in England, but particularly in the States, seems to them to be effortlessly weird.

"So to get over to them the fact that the record isn't all *that* strange, you sometimes have to fill in a little of the background. You know, I've run into this a lot. People build up such preconceptions or they just associate you with one thing and they can't hear anything else you do. It's like they're looking at a painting you've done, upside down. Unless you can change their point of view, they're never gonna see what that picture is. That's another reason I thought talking about the album was worthwhile.

"I mean, there are people even now that can't hear this record because they can only hear the old records through it. They manage to synthesise the sound of it. I've actually read it in print: that this sounds exactly like all my other records. Some German guy when I was doing all the interviews in Europe, he came along in a trench coat and he's going, 'I zink ze rekort iz a verk of genius, but zer iz no new way forwert.' He thought there were no new ideas on it. I said, 'Well, I don't remember ever before writing a song about a comedian dying and going up to heaven and meeting God. Show me where that appears in my back catalogue and I'll agree with you.' And he went, 'No... it does not have ze

TOM SHEEHAN

Onstage in '89: "What's postmodern? It doesn't exist. It's an oxymoron"

postmodern vey.' And I thought, 'What's postmodern?' It doesn't exist. It's an oxymoron. It's a senseless concept. Like military intelligence. Or Vice President Dan Quayle.

"But, anyway, it proved the point that sometimes, with the best will in the world to try and speak plainly to people, you can't do anything about how people listen to what you're doing. They'll hear whatever they want to hear."

MY OWN FIRST reaction to *Spike* was loud and indignant, the furious gnashing of a fan betrayed, small-minded and spiteful. My favourite Costello albums have invariably found him in harness with The Attractions, galloping at full tilt, often neurotic, eyes blazing, burning up the surrounding landscape. *Spike* is a notably different beast, and at first I wasn't much convinced by any of it.

As you'll know, the record was recorded in London, Hollywood, Ireland and New Orleans, and features an international supporting cast, including co-producer and "musical conscience" T Bone Burnett, Paul McCartney, Chrissie Hynde, Roger McGuinn, Allen Toussaint, The Dirty Dozen Brass Band, guitarist Marc Ribot and percussionist Michael Blair from Tom Waits' band, veteran jazzer Buell Niedlinger, an assortment of former Confederates and a lineup of some of Ireland's finest traditional musicians.

The album largely reflects these global resources, romping through what *Village Voice* critic Richard Gehr described as "the rock of all ages: Morrisonian Celtic soul, gospel, R'n'B, protest folk, cool jazz, C&W and ballads". Costello has been this diverse before, but never all at once. *Spike* sounded initially like a kind of musical tourism.

Costello is appalled by this description.

"I absolutely resent that," he says, hauling himself out of a slouch. "You make it sound like we were sending these songs on fuckin' holiday. It's nonsense. The songs were recorded wherever it was best for the songs, and played by the people we thought would play them best.

"I don't think your criticism holds up at all. I think it's just a cheap shot. You know, it's amazing. I got accused yesterday of using the Irish musicians on 'Any King's Shilling' because it was fashionable to be into traditional folk music – it's a ludicrous argument. I was getting thrown out of folk clubs 20 years ago...

"And it really just goes to show the depth of ignorance of people who can't hear that the instruments are being used in a different way to traditional music. On 'Any King's Shilling', the song is set in Dublin in World War I, and I wanted to complement that location musically. I wanted it to sound like 1914, you know. So we wanted it to have the harp, and to sound very formal, like drawing-room music. And the conversation in the song is also quite consciously written in that very formal turn-of-the-century idiom.

"I mean, I'm not a mug. I know what I'm doing. I've been doing this for 12 fuckin' years. I know how to speak now, thank you. And the conversation in the song couldn't have been, 'Hey, Charlie, yer better watch aht, they're gonna kick yer fuckin' 'ead in, mate.' I'm trying in the song to imitate the way people spoke then. It's quite conscious. It's not important that people applaud and go, 'Oh, what a clever literary device.' I mean, you don't want to turn into Tom Stoppard or someone. But if I'd written it in a more contemporary vocabulary and had contemporary instruments, people would have assumed it's taking place in Belfast or Beirut or wherever. And I actually wanted to tell a more specific story.

"At the same time, it's obviously not lost on me that the song has a more topical relevance. The idea that the song could be about something that's still happening today isn't beyond possibility. But you don't have to shout it from the fuckin' mountaintops to make sure people

TIM HALL/REDFERNS

make the connection. So the choice of instruments and the formality of the arrangement, it isn't a form of musical tourism. It's an attempt to create a kind of snapshot of the past.

"And for my money, it works. It's only if you're determined to criticise the record without thinking about it that you could say I'm using these instruments just because they're hip. That's just shit, nonsense. In each case, each song was a story that we told from the inside first. It's not what the more facile critics have assumed, which is that it's somehow showing off, which it isn't at all. I can get really indignant about this, because I really know I'm justified in the use of all the instruments.

"When it comes down to it, they don't know what I know. It sounds arrogant, but that happens to be the way it is."

IT TOOK A while for *Spike* to sink in. I still have to leave the room whenever "Veronica" comes on, but over the last couple of months, as the musical climate deteriorates and the rediscovery of the fucking wah-wah pedal is about the only thing that gets the young braves excited, the record's become increasingly indispensable.

Beyond the crafted excellence of songs like "... This Town...", "Let Him Dangle", "God's Comic", "Satellite", "Any King's Shilling", "Miss Macbeth" and "Last Boat Leaving", the album would be worth the price of admission for one track alone. I'm thinking, of course, of "Tramp The Dirt Down", Costello's furious indictment of 10 years of Conservative government and Margaret Thatcher specifically, in which Costello wishes the dragon dead and imagines dancing on her grave. It's a vicious tirade, all the more brutal for the absence of melodrama, breast-beating self-righteousness and political posturing. The clear-sightedness of its venom is chilling.

As Greil Marcus observed in *Village Voice*: "To make true political music, you have to say what decent people don't want to hear; that's something that people fit for satellite benefit concerts will never understand, and that Costello understood before anyone heard his name." It's this terrific disinclination to pander to liberalistic, simple-minded, humanistic self-righteousness that separates Costello so profoundly from the simpering conceits, the bland admonishments, the reek of moral attitudinising that marks the worried global concerns of Bono and Jim Kerr and Sting...

"...Sting," Costello laughs. He knows what I'm talking about. "I always try to avoid slandering Sting because he's such an easy target," he continues. "And he's so pompous at times, but I think he's basically a decent guy... We had a very funny conversation at that Clapham anti-apartheid thing that Dammers put together, the one that lost all the money. And he came into my dressing room, because he always seems to sort of seek me out if we're ever anywhere together, to take me to task for the last horrible thing I've said about him.

"And he said, 'I really don't know what I'm going to do next. What topics are there left for me to discuss?' And I said, 'That's the fuckin' trouble with you.' I said, 'You've been a bloody pop star for 10 years – now you want to be a serious fuckin' artist. Don't come around here with your serious artist shit. And by the way, fire that fuckin' piano player.' He seemed to take it quite well. And I think it's good for people like that to have people like me around to take the piss out of them... It's almost like they need people who aren't afraid to take the piss out of them so they can sharpen their act up a bit. Because he's pretty good, Sting, when you get in a little fencing match with him. He's a pretty sharp guy. He's not quite as pompous and idiotic as he might appear in a few of the announcements he makes in the papers."

Then why do I feel this irresistible compulsion to ridicule the posturing old bastard at every conceivable opportunity?

"Probably because nothing he ever does quite rings true," Costello offers. "If he's making a speech about the Amazonian rain forests, he has to go and get himself painted up by the tribe... and it's like, 'Oh, NO! Don't do that, Sting! For fuck's sake.' But that's maybe what you've got to do if you're standing onstage at the Maracanã stadium in Rio trying to make a very sincere statement. Maybe you do have to make it in neon letters, eight feet high. In which case, of course it's gonna end up being a fuckin' platitude.

"I remember I did this benefit show with Susannah York a few years ago, called The Big One. And it had real good intentions, and it had U2 and The Style Council and Ian Dury and a few other people who have since disappeared, like Mari Wilson. And every fuckin' actor in England was on it. And it ran hideously over time, by about three-and-a-half hours. And these people couldn't see that the words they were saying were just falling out of their mouths and dropping onto the floor. And in the long run, I was the same as everyone else...

"Everything was just like... all the words they were spouting were like... it was like they were made out of cast iron. They didn't fly through the air and hit people where they're supposed to be hit, wherever it is, the head or the heart. They just went clunk on the floor, like a load of fuckin' scrap metal, you know.

"And I suppose it was just this very effete, affected form of protest that didn't really mean anything that got to me. These people, they really meant it. I think they were sincere, so I don't want to start slagging them off. But in the long run, it was just a lot of cocktail party chat.

"It reminded me of that Woody Allen movie. He's at some chi-chi kind of party and everyone's talking about orgasms, and then suddenly he introduces Nazis into the conversation. He tells them that a group of Nazis are gonna march on New Jersey. And this guy goes, 'Oh, yes — there was a witheringly funny cartoon about that in the papers... Humour, that's the way to deal with these people, don't you think?' And Woody Allen says, 'No.' He says, 'When it comes to Nazis, I find baseball bats are much more effective.'

"I don't think you have to spend too long pondering the significance of that remark to get the point."

"IT'S LIKE SOME KIND OF MASS HYPNOSIS THATCHER'S ACHIEVED. PEOPLE ARE AFRAID TO SPEAK OUT"
ELVIS COSTELLO

SO WHAT DOES "Tramp The Dirt Down" achieve; what will it change?

"Nothing I can think of," says Costello. "I honestly don't think it will change anything. Like I said to one guy who asked a similar question, songs like that, they're like tiny marker buoys... this is where the ship went down. A song like that, it's not a party political broadcast, there's no manifesto... It just says, 'I'll only be happy when this woman's dead.'

"And some people no doubt might find that extreme. But it's meant to be. I make no apology for that song. It's an honest emotional response to events. And yes, it's unreasonable, it's irrational, and writing it was like casting out demons or something. And the song itself is the result of a form of madness, because when you get to that point of thinking these thoughts, actually wishing somebody dead, it really does become a form of madness. It's a psychopathic thought. And it's fuckin' disturbing to find it in your own head. But it would be cowardly not to express it. Because once it's there, if you don't get it out, it's only gonna come back and haunt you some more.

"I also think you have to remember that it's not only her the song is aimed at. It's what she represents. The way she's changed the way people value things. It's like some kind of mass hypnosis she's achieved. People are afraid to speak out. You know, one thing I thought I'd be asked when people heard it, was whether I was saying it might've been a good thing if she'd died at Brighton. I don't think so. It would have made things 10 times worse, because then she would have been a martyr. We would have had a dead queen. So, really, in a profound sense, the song is hopeless. It's a hopeless argument. Because I think it's a hopeless situation. So, no, it's not in a large, historical sense, going to change anything.

"But I think it does have maybe an individual effect. There's always a chance it'll sneak through somehow. Like, I sang it in Shetland, at the folk festival, and I sang it in one place that was very brightly lit and I could see the audience quite clearly. And all the way through, there was one guy nodding away, applauding every line, obviously getting into it. And on the other side, there was another guy being physically restrained from getting up on the stage and hitting me. He just fused, he really went. You could see it in his face. And I thought, 'Well, I've really got a winner now.' To the extent, you know, that it had succeeded in being at least provocative."

Is that all you can ask of a song these days?

"I've never really known what you're supposed to expect from songs," Costello says. "And I think there's a danger in the very talking about it, it makes it seem like you've achieved more than you have..."

Especially when the song itself becomes merely attention-grabbing because of its subject. Like Morrissey's "Margaret On The Guillotine", which ended up as a novelty, trivialising the argument.

"I don't know much about Morrissey," Costello admits, "apart from the fact that he sometimes brings out records with the greatest titles in the world, which somewhere along the line he neglects to write songs for. But I haven't heard that particular song, so I can't really comment on it. But generally, I think the best that can be achieved by songs like 'Tramp The Dirt Down' is something like 'Free Nelson Mandela' achieved. The record didn't get Mandela released, but it did increase the membership of the anti-apartheid movement, because Jerry very intelligently printed their address on the sleeve. And the record introduced Mandela to a lot of people who maybe otherwise would never have heard of him. And there's a point where political art only works at that level – the communication of basic information.

"On a more immediate level," Costello goes on, no stopping him now, "you can, I suppose, hope to annoy people, like that guy in Shetland. I mean, *The Sun* ran a piece a couple of weeks ago saying I'd been banned by the BBC because I said 'I'm fuckin' sick of this' on *The Late Show*. I haven't seen the programme, but I remember swearing. I was asked something and I remember saying, 'I'm 35 years old, I'm not a boy any more. Don't patronise me.' It's like that Grateful Dead song, 'Ship Of Fools' – *"It makes me wild/With 30 years upon my head/ To have you call me child"*... You do sometimes feel, particularly with the nanny aspect of this government, that they are treating everybody like they're little fuckin' children...

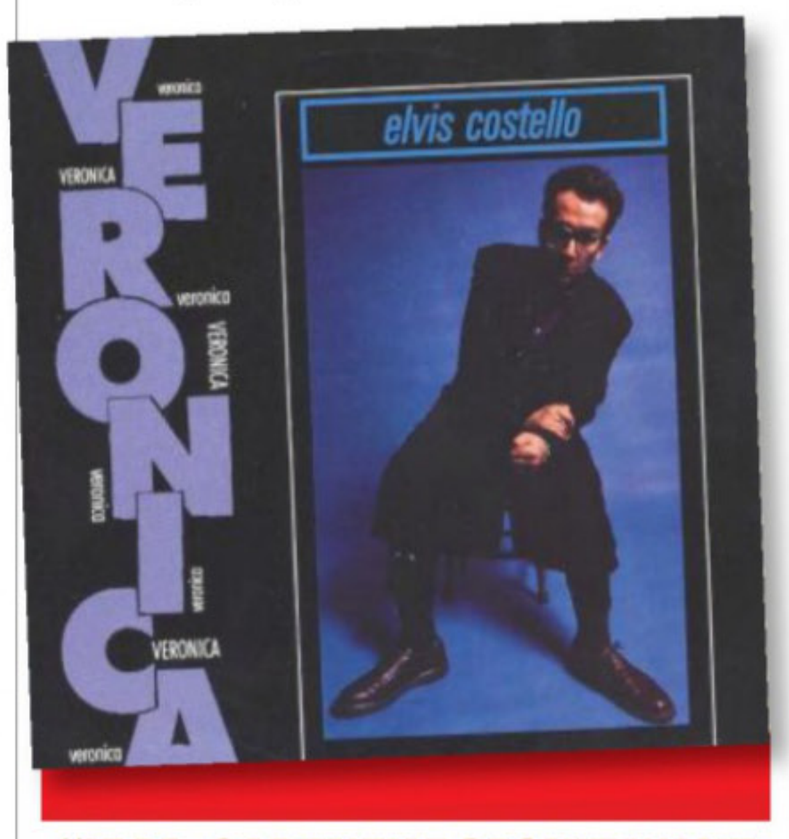
"So *The Sun* runs this thing saying I swore on a live television show. And it was obviously pre-recorded, because I was in America when it was shown. But a spokesman is supposed to have said, 'Well, it jolly well caused a stink around here at the BBC.' And they even quoted me. 'Costello said last night, "I stand by every word."' Well, they must be fuckin' telepathic at the fuckin' *Sun*, because no-one spoke to me about it.

"But that's an accolade, to get that sort of thing written about you in *The Sun*. It means you're still getting up somebody's fuckin' nose.

"And these days, that's an achievement in itself."

TAKEN FROM MELODY MAKER 20/5/1989

THE LAST TIME I was in Dublin with Costello, we ended up drinking in some gaudy nightclub where the fluorescent throb and gash of neon lit us in garish hues and strobes flashed, epileptic and deranged. Bono arrived just after us. His appearance among the heathen throng was almost papal. First, the crowd parted in front of him, then gathered around him, reverent, adoring, as he advanced across the club. He settled at a table opposite us and looked around the room with the empty, dead stare of someone who'd long since lost the plot; a distant, cold glare that saw very little and understood even less. He could have been on another planet, and probably was. He was quickly surrounded by a sea of smothering supplicants, eager to pay their respects, kiss the hem of his coat, be touched by his presence, blessed by his righteousness.



"IF McCARTNEY DOESN'T WANT TO USE HIS MUSICAL TALENT TO SAY WORLD-CHANGING THINGS, THAT'S HIS FUCKIN' BUSINESS"
ELVIS COSTELLO

"Fuckin' place," Costello muttered into his beer, "it's turning into Lourdes,"

We were at a table on a corner of the dancefloor, trying to make ourselves heard to each other above the infernal thud of the disco. Now that you're closer to us, you can hear that we're talking about *Blood & Chocolate*. Costello is telling me that he had been convinced that this was the record that people had been waiting for him to make since *Get Happy!!*, a return to the classic Attractions sound, the record that at a stroke would revive his faltering commercial ambitions, thoroughly thwarted for most of the decade. This was outrageous. *Blood & Chocolate* is the most extreme and brutal of all Costello's albums. It sounds like it's been ripped screaming from the clefts of Bedlam. In the bland, conservative climate of late-'80s pop, it was a howl from an outer darkness. It stood no chance of being a hit, so when Costello tells me that he thought it would return him to the mainstream I don't believe a word. A year later, though, in Dublin again, Costello is sticking to the same story.

"I honestly wasn't being ingenuous," he says. "I knew in America, especially, they took a huge gasp of breath when we did *Almost Blue*, and although *King Of America* was one of those records that got me great reviews, Columbia just couldn't sell the fuckin' thing... So I did have the notion when we came to do *Blood & Chocolate* that in the States at least, they'd throw their hats in the air and cheer. I really did think it was the album they'd been wanting me to deliver. Because there were elements of it that I thought were stereotypical. It was like an older, grumpier version of *This Year's Model*, which I was pretty sure they'd go for. As it turned out, they did to it what they'd done to the two or three records before it. They buried the fuckin' thing.

"In retrospect, I think we underestimated how fuckin' harsh it sounded. But that was the mood we were in. We wanted it live and we wanted it loud, and we achieved that at the expense of everything else. I mean, we tried to do a ballad on that record, a really pretty song called 'Forgive Her Anything', but we physically couldn't play it. It sounded like we were playing with boxing gloves on. It needed too delicate an arrangement for the sound we'd contrived. And we got to really fighting about it. Like, 'It's your fuckin' fault, you're playing too fuckin' loud.' 'No, I'm not. You're playing too fuckin' fast.' It was like the fuckin' Troggs. But there was nothing we could do with it. That sound we had, there was just too much barbed wire in it. It was just too fuckin' ferocious."

Given the subsequent split with The Attractions, was *Blood & Chocolate* meant to be a land of last hurrah?

"Not intentionally. The idea was just to get together again and make a record. Originally it was gonna be an EP, a one-off thing, a bit of an undercover job, just to put the fun back into playing together. Because by then everything had got a bit askew. There was a lot of bad feeling that because of the way things turned out, The Attractions ended up playing on only one track on *King Of America*. And the internal politics surrounding that record weren't too pleasant. And I don't think I handled it very well. But neither did a couple of the group. It just got unnecessarily ugly, you know. Like you were there that night at the Duke Of York's when I had that row with Steve. That's the sort of thing that was happening. People were being set up against each other. And I hate all that shit, and I didn't want everything to fall apart in acrimony, so the main thing was just to get back together instead of bickering. The thing was, I had no idea it was gonna turn out to be so extreme. But I love it. I think it's one of the two or three best records we made together."

Releasing two six-minute singles from it, "Tokyo Storm Warning" and "I Want You", didn't seem to be the most thoughtful commercial strategy. Were you being perverse?

"No... I really thought they were the best two songs on the record. There were maybe a couple of others that could've been singles. 'I Hope You're Happy Now' might've been a hit, or 'Blue Chair'. But I couldn't see the wood for the trees over that one. You know, I sometimes tend to get too self-conscious about pop music. When I've got a good pop song, I have difficulty actually doing it properly. I somehow want to fuck it up. And I think that the idea sometimes of releasing the obvious poppy track from

an album as a single is patronising."

Doesn't "Veronica" fall into that category?

"No," Costello says firmly, prepared to defend this one to the hilt, whatever the damage. "That's unashamedly pop music. You know, with that, I've come back to the way I was thinking when we did things like 'Oliver's Army'. I'm loath to say the word, because the minute you say something's subversive, it's not subversive any more... But there is a trick to it, you know, where you can slip something out that takes people a while to figure out what it is you're actually singing about. With 'Veronica', if people had realised straight off that it was about an old woman, they might have thought it was too maudlin and just shut it off. Whereas the whole point of the song is that there is some hope and defiance in the character. So I think it's really good that it sounds like it's about a young girl, instead of it being a ponderous thing about an old woman, or something self-consciously dramatic like 'Eleanor Rigby'. Which is a great record, but you immediately know it's about this strange person. Whereas the idea with 'Veronica' isn't to patronise the character. It's said with love. So I like the idea that the music is really kind of bright and pretty. It's the prettiest record I've made in ages."

"Veronica" is one of two tracks on *Spike* written with Paul McCartney. Another of their collaborations, "My Brave Face", has just been released as the ex-Beatle's new single; more are to follow on McCartney's forthcoming LP, *Flowers In The Dirt*. We had talked the previous evening about the collaboration, and Costello, getting drunk, had worked himself into a rare old fit about the jaundiced view some people have of McCartney: he'd even been told that working with him had somehow devalued his own critical standing.

"That's true," Costello says the morning after, nursing a hangover, feeling fragile but feisty. "People have actually told me that. But fuck 'em. They're people who wouldn't know a good piece of music if it boned 'em up the arse."

So what was your immediate response when the call came from the McCartney Empire? Did you think you were on to an easy earner? Were you flattered? Suspicious?

"It might sound facile," Costello says, "but I didn't think about it in any of those terms. I just thought, 'Let's give it a go.' And it was all very unself-conscious, no big deal. We just got on with it. Occasionally, I'd look up and think, 'Oh, hell, it's him.' Because he really – don't laugh – he really does look frighteningly like him. The same was true of Orbison. He's one of those people who look exactly like you expect them to look. You know, I think of him like he's Buzz Aldrin or somebody. Somebody who's been to the moon and back. Nobody – none of us in whatever part of the business we're in – none of us can conceive what it must be like to have been through what he's experienced. It's a unique experience, probably, in the 20th Century to be him. And that's not making too big a thing of it.

"And the fact that he's so easygoing about it all just seems to rile people. I mean, he could be a mad person, he could have reacted to what he went through in any number of ways that would prevent him now from being as straightforward and normal as he apparently is. The very fact that this guy has sort of glided through life and been very well rewarded is the cause, I think, of a lot of the flak he gets. It's just fuckin' envy, that's what it is, when you get right down to it..."

And he hasn't been shot, so he's not a legend.

"Absolutely," Costello says, heaving forward. "And he's uncomfortably undramatic about this thing he's been through. But, you know, he has been through it all, through more things than you could probably imagine. So why does he have to live up to somebody else's fantasy of who he is? I think that's a completely unreasonable demand to make of anyone.

"It's like these people who criticise him for being too rich or too famous. What the fuck has it got to do with them? It's lust crap, you know. Why don't they just shut the fuck up and let him get on with his music? I also think that people who criticise him for being sentimental are talking a lot of shit as well. Because in any other line of work, if a man of 46 wasn't sentimental about his kids, they'd think he was a fuckin' sociopath, you know. He's a married man, he has a nice life. What's the fuckin' matter with that? Fuckin' hell, just because he's famous they want him to be at the barricades all the fuckin' time. It's just stupid. He's just a really good musician, probably one of the best there has been in a long time... it's absolutely coming out of his fingers, you know... and if he doesn't want to use that musical talent to say world-changing things, that's his fuckin' business."

Blood & Chocolate struck more than one commentator as a protracted musical identification with the troubled genius of John Lennon. When the invitation came to work with McCartney, was there maybe a feeling that you were being cast in the role that Lennon once played?

"No," Costello says quickly. "Lennon's obviously not around to be fallible or great or whatever – some bastard shot him – so in America, I think, they're sometimes obviously lining up a lot of people for the role. And I think it's a dangerous thing. In America, some really neurotic critics are trying to fit me in those shoes. And I think it's fuckin' irresponsible. You know, COME ON. DRAW A FUCKIN' TARGET ON MY BACK..."

Costello has been through all this before, after the notorious Columbus incident he received nearly 200 death threats in a week.

"Don't remind me," he shudders. "Don't remind me."

THE AFTERNOON DRAWS on. We are both feeling as parched as fuck. Costello orders another round of drinks. We talk about some of his other recent collaborations, most notably with Roy Orbison, whose version of the radically rewritten "The Comedians" was the undisputed high spot of Orbison's posthumous *Mystery Girl* LP. Before flying out to Dublin, I had belatedly caught up with the *Roy Orbison And Friends: A Black And White Night* video of the commemorative concert in Los Angeles, at which Orbison was backed by an all-star cast including Elvis Presley's Taking Care Of Business band (The TCBs, featuring Glen D Hardin, Ron Tutt, Jerry Scheff and legendary guitarist James Burton, who appeared on *King Of America*). Also on the show were Costello, Tom Waits, Jackson Browne, KD Lang, Bonnie Raitt and Bruce Springsteen.

So what was it like, Elvis, clocking in behind the Big O?

Pretty riffing: James Burton and Bruce Springsteen trade licks as Roy Orbison and EC look on – The Coconut Grove, LA, September 30, 1987

HBO-CINEMAX/PHOTOFEST/RETNA LTD

"Well, it was very hard to be in awe of him," Costello says. "He was just very gentle, a little removed, perhaps a bit bemused by all the attention, but quite moved by everyone's enthusiasm. Because basically it was a big pain in the arse doing the show. I mean, it looked a lot of fun when they cut it together, but I have to say the production people had very little consideration for the musicians, including Roy.

"Basically, they didn't have a fuckin' clue. In the end, T-Bone took a lot of the heat and he ended up telling them what to do, otherwise they would've had the musicians leaving in droves. Because there was one point where there was nearly a rebellion. Even with all deference to Roy, I think there was a point where some of the musicians were ready to walk, because there were a lot of ugly political things going down that could've been avoided if they'd been a bit more bit more sensible. And what you see is this really good-natured show, so it really goes to show how much people dug him, because they all put that behind them. And a lot of the credit for that has to go to the TCBs, particularly, even though they were the ones most taken advantage of.

"Like, *Rolling Stone* came to take pictures and they didn't even ask James Burton to be in the shot. The guy from *Rolling Stone* didn't even recognise him. It was sort of, 'Right, we'll have Roy in the middle, and Bruce, you sit this side of Roy, and Elvis, you sit on the other side...' I said, 'What does this make me? The Holy Ghost or God the Son?' Because that's what it looked like... the fuckin' Holy Trinity, with Roy as God the Father, you know..."

The show brought you into immediate contact with some people like Springsteen, about whom you've often been less than flattering...

"Let's be frank," Costello laughs. "They were people I've often been downright fuckin' rude about. In fact, I've usually slagged them off, which I think is fair enough. I have my opinions about them and they probably know what they think about me. They might get a little outraged sometimes, but I don't give a flying fuck, you know."

So how did you hit it off with old Bruce?

"I thought Bruce wasn't too bad," Costello says, and I can only think the drinks are having an effect. "I mean, he didn't come until the day of the show. But he turned up, no entourage, no bodyguards, no manager, no roadie. Carrying his own guitar as far as I could see. And I assumed he knew the songs so well he could just busk it. But I have this nice little image of him... Where we did the show was at the Coconut Grove, in the Ambassador Hotel, where Robert Kennedy was shot. The Grove is in a kind of basement at the back, and the kitchen just behind the stage is where he got shot. Place was like something out of the fuckin' *Shining*... Anyway, all the boys were crammed into one dressing room. And you couldn't move for all these baskets of fruit. It's Hollywood, you know, so every fucker on the show gets a basket of fruit with nuts and fuckin' cheese... And, anyway, we're all packed in there, and it suddenly reminded me of when I was a kid and I used to go to the Joe Loss shows with my dad... all the guys in the band, standing around in their underwear, smoking... It was great. We were really like The Orchestra... And just before we were due on, I looked around and there's Springsteen. He's got a Walkman on, and he's got his electric guitar and he's got the chart of 'Only The Lonely', and he's looking really intense and worried. And suddenly he went, 'Oh, fuck – that's how it goes.'

"But I thought he played great on the show. He played his guitar solo, didn't he? That one guitar solo that he does. He plays with his eyebrows, have you noticed that? And there were a couple of songs where he has to trade off guitar parts with James Burton, and everybody thought he was really gonna be out of his depth. But he didn't try to outflash Burton. You can't, let's face it. So he played his one-note solo and he played it very emphatically, like he really meant it. And James came back with this ridiculously fancy lick that he does and gave Springsteen this look, you know, 'Top that, boy.' And Bruce is going, 'Oooooh, shit... back to the

one-note solo...' I thought he was pretty cool."

Costello is by now in a pretty expansive anecdotal mood. I ask him about Van Morrison, who appeared with him the last time he played the Albert Hall.

"I think what I really admire about him," Costello says, "apart from the fact that he makes the most incredible fuckin' records, is his singlemindedness. People go on about him being difficult, but he does it his way and if you can't accept that, then go somewhere else. I don't think he's gonna cry. He's tougher than that. He really is tougher than the rest. He's in a class of one, and if you don't like it then fuck off, you know. There are only like two or three people with his kind of singular identity in rock'n'roll. Like, Lou Reed, Dylan..."

You met Dylan once, didn't you?

"I've met Dylan a few times, yeah," Costello says. "We had a strange conversation once, I remember. I met all his kids once in a parking lot in Minneapolis. He came to this party with all his sons. Lined them up like they were on parade, and I had to shake hands with them. He said, 'This is Jesse, he knows all the words to "Pump It Up".' And I thought, 'Now there's something wrong with this statement, Bob. He knows all the words to "Subterranean Homesick Blues" is what you probably mean.' Jesse was a punk fan. I don't know how old he is now, but then he was into The Clash and people like that. I think he thought his dad was a bit old-fashioned. Maybe he's since realised that his dad was a bit more happening than Mick Jones, you know. I hope so. I mean, I love old Mick, he's great. But Bob's always been a bit more happening than Mick, let's face it."

What do you talk to someone like Dylan about? The weather?

"Actually," Costello says, "yeah. With somebody like Dylan or Van, they say they're unpredictable souls who can be rude to people. So I figure if they just accept you and you just talk in an ordinary conversation about the weather or something, it means they're giving you somehow more credit than they would to someone they don't really have time for. I mean, you hear all these horror stories about these people, but you've got to remember that there are plenty of people who want a piece of them and they make unreasonable demands on them. And there are a few people that have tried to make those demands of me, so I'm aware of the fact that if you start like getting in on them and it's like, 'C'mon, Bob, where ARE the Gates Of Eden?' you'd expect to be shown the door. I'm always mindful of what it's like when somebody gets on my case. Sometimes it's well-meaning, but you really just can't answer their questions, because you can't think like them. They've got their perspective on what you do and you just can't get into it."

THE NIGHT BEFORE the interview, Costello had appeared at the Irish Music Awards. He and Christy Moore had done a version of "Dark End Of The Street", an old Costello favourite. It was a moment of sober beauty in an otherwise unremarkable pantomime. The front rows of the audience were full of wriggling Brosettes who glared at Costello with furious indignation. Turns out later that they are howling mad with him for being less than kind to Bros on a recent radio show. After the show, some of them cornered him in a local pub.

"SPRINGSTEEN DIDN'T TRY TO OUTFLASH BURTON. YOU CAN'T... BUT HE PLAYED HIS ONE-NOTE SOLO LIKE HE MEANT IT"

With the Big O and The Boss, 1987: "Bruce was pretty cool... Roy was gentle, a little removed"

"It was as funny as hell," he says. "They all wanted my blood for slandering Luke by suggesting that he might be something less than a Titan. I just felt a bit sad for them. Because this, you know, is the extent of their musical excitement, this rather dull group. And they were going, 'Tell us you really don't hate them.' And I'm going, 'I don't hate them, I just don't like 'em. I'm not supposed to fuckin' like 'em. You're supposed to like 'em...' It was all a bit pathetic, really, because they'll all be embarrassed in four years time that they were ever Brosettes. It's like, where do you meet Bay City Rollers fans these days... And Bros will be forgotten in the long run, because they don't represent anything particularly worthwhile. It's like Michael Jackson. He'll be forgotten in 50 years. He'll be like this person who statistically was famous, like Al Jolson or Rudy Vallee, but nobody'll really remember him. He's just a facsimile of excitement. And because there's no substance to what he does, and because he's sold his soul to a corporate identity, which is actually bigger than he is, in the long run I think he'll be swallowed by it. It's like Whitney Houston – I think it's downright sad that somebody as good as her will take a billion dollars from Pepsi to sell herself down the river. She's just turned into this cabaret singer. You look at her and it's like the light's gone from her eyes. She's just another victim of the Pepsi Vampires."

So who are the strong, Elvis, who's to be trusted? Who's angry any more?

"I dunno," Costello says wearily, exhaustion creeping upon him like a slow tide. "It does seem at the moment that there's no real willingness to test anything. But it's not surprising really. All the mannerisms of rebellion in music seems to have been used up. You only have to look at Guns N' Roses to realise that. Cait got their album, you know, and it's fuckin' terrible. It's like an Outlaws record or something. 'I'm goin' down the road with my geetar and I'm a baad muthafucker...' – Fuck off, you little twat. It's about as rock'n'roll as fuckin' David Nixon. The thing is, you can't keep leaping out of the cupboard going boo to people. It's not frightening any more.

"And the funny thing is, the real wild men are still unacceptable. I'm not talking about someone like Johnny Rotten. He's completely acceptable. He's just like Quentin Crisp. He's an English eccentric. But Jerry Lee Lewis, man. I saw Jerry Lee, and he's still fuckin' unacceptable to most people. T-Bone went for a meeting with him, because he's been working on the film they're doing about him. And they went to this really chi-chi Hollywood cafe, and this little waiter comes up and goes, 'Hi, my name ith Cwithtopher and I'll be your waiter for tonight. Is there something I can get you?'

"And Jerry Lee says, 'Yeah. What about something blonde, 21 years old with big fuckin' tits.' Just starts straight in, you know. Brilliant. And someone like that, they're always gonna be on the outside. He's definitely the real thing. And there's really no-one else around who's that unique, that singular. I don't see anyone like that around anymore. I see a few interesting eccentrics. Morrissey. Michael Stipe. Johnny Lydon. Myself, maybe. But those heavy metal bands who think they're so fuckin' outrageous. I just think, 'Fuck off, pal. You don't even own the territory.'

"Because I look back at some of the things we've done, and it's no fuckin' contest. I mean, we've had our fuckin' moments, man. And they don't even come close."

MIGHTY LIKE A ROSE

The bold beginning of Costello's next phase – or a dense and impenetrable wrong move? It's complicated... BY GRAEME THOMSON

RELEASED MAY 14, 1991

THE LONG HAIR and the Catweazle beard seemed to instantly alienate critics and fans alike when Elvis Costello returned with his 13th studio album. But the changes that dictated the shape and sound of one of his most dense, complex and relatively unloved albums were far more radical. Between the recording of *Spike* and *Mighty Like A Rose*, Costello had relocated to Dublin with Cait O'Riordan, a move partly predicated on his disgust at the Anglo-American political axis after 10 years of Tory rule and the beginnings of trouble in the Gulf. His rage would seep, none too coherently, into new songs such as "Invasion Hit Parade" and "Hurry Down Doomsday".

Costello was also enjoying an intense immersion in classical music. He had become an avid follower of pioneering string ensemble The Brodsky Quartet, and could also be heard raving about the varied charms of Schubert's sonatas, Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* and Cecilia Bartoli. This new interest began to shape the way he approached his own music and the ambitions he harboured for it. When he was commissioned in 1990 to score, with Richard Harvey, the soundtrack to Alan Bleasdale's television drama *GBH*, Costello found himself striving to communicate more sophisticated melodic and harmonic ideas without being able to read or write music. With the help of a computer, he began composing multiple, overlapping melodic lines, a methodology he used not only for *GBH*'s instrumental pieces, but also for arranging songs for his next album.

If *Spike* was marked by a Tom Waitsian sonic adventurousness, *Mighty Like A Rose* was an even bolder step. The original plan had been to make an album rooted in live performances with The Attractions, but their participation foundered on financial disagreements (although both Steve Nieve and Pete Thomas appear on the record). Instead, Costello turned to the group of crack US sessions musicians he'd been working with, on and off, live and in the studio, since *King Of America*.

In the end, the idea of a tight pop record got lost beneath the kitchen-sink production style. Opening track and lead single "The Other Side Of Summer", an enjoyably manic surf-pop gem propelled by Costello at his most quotable ("*Was it a millionaire who said 'Imagine no possessions'?*" snarls Paul McCartney's latest writing partner), featured 10 musicians playing live simultaneously. Their parts were then double-tracked, before three separate vocal harmonies were added to the main melody.

This ornate extravagance, typical of the album, was not random. All the vocal lines were carefully planned, the string and horn parts had been written on keyboard beforehand, and even the sequencing had been predetermined before a note had been recorded. *Mighty Like A Rose* was intended as a canvas for Costello to display more ambitious ways of writing and arranging, but the problematic result is that the more inviting songs – and there are several excellent ones here – arrive swamped by layers of stuff.

Some of them are as dense and impenetrable as anything Costello has ever recorded. "Invasion Hit Parade", a huffing stop-start affair featuring a trumpet cameo from his father Ross, tackles the Cold War thaw so obliquely that its true purpose remains inaccessible. Co-producer Mitchell Froom later recalled a 25-minute conversation with Costello on the meaning of the song, at the end of which he wasn't any more enlightened. "Hurry Down Doomsday" takes aim at the Gulf War and cultural imperialism – "*Mickey Mouse, Marlboro and Coca-Cola*" – but lands closer to incoherent ravings.

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"The music for the most part is self-indulgent and sour, or lazy and glutinously sweet. Worst of all, it's bloody dull. I rushed out to greet the cool surf and found myself ankle-deep in snot. The Declan I know would never have treated us so shabbily."
BARBARA ELLEN, NME, MAY 18, 1991

"A relentless, arrogant, furious catalogue of complaints and counter-attacks. EC's a bloodied love saint from the depths." CHRIS ROBERTS, MELODY MAKER, MAY 18, 1991

The idea of marrying rich, baroque orchestral pop to a bleak worldview was an interesting one on paper, but it often fails in execution. "Georgie And Her Rival" opens with the same chord sequence as "Oliver's Army", but its pop nous is buried in clutter. "All Grown Up" is a lovely song, but one hamstrung by Costello's decision to roar the words like an embittered drunk at a shotgun wedding.

Even when all the busy-ness is stripped away, the results fail to convince. The stark "After The Fall" is drab and lifeless. "Broken", a Celtic dirge written by O'Riordan and recorded against a backdrop of ethereal aural wallpaper, remains a blot on Costello's catalogue. One of two McCartney co-writes, "Playboy To A Man" is a careening trifle, though its raw energy perhaps comes closest to the record's intent.

At other times, the plan almost comes together. The elegant chamber setting of "Harpies Bizarre" conveys a mannered restraint utterly in keeping with the song's put-upon female subject. On "So Like Candy", the other McCartney collaboration, the minor-chord murk and Valium haze renders the sad mustiness of a vacated room palpable. "How To Be Dumb" – a coruscating riposte to the publication of Bruce Thomas' memoir *The Big Wheel*, in which Costello, and indeed life itself, does not emerge with much credit – turns personal enmity into a rousing reprise of "Like A Rolling Stone". Best of all is "Couldn't Call It Unexpected No 4", a dark fireside tale of family secrets, lost faith and lingering regret on which the album's ambition at last pays tangible dividends, the gorgeous melody lifted by an ambitious, carnivalesque arrangement.

Mighty Like A Rose is not a record that often succeeds on its own terms, but it was one Costello clearly needed to make. With the benefit of hindsight it makes more sense, setting him on the path he would follow for much of the 1990s and beyond. His collaborations with the Brodksy Quartet, Anne Sofie Von Otter and Burt Bacharach, his curation of the 1995 Meltdown festival, his move into scoring opera and ballet, can all be traced back to this point. For good or ill, the roots of Costello as all-round musical renaissance man are planted here.

TRACKMARKS MIGHTY LIKE A ROSE

1. The Other Side Of Summer ★★★★
2. Hurry Down Doomsday (The Bugs Are Taking Over) ★★
3. How To Be Dumb ★★★★
4. All Grown Up ★★★
5. Invasion Hit Parade ★★★
6. Harpies Bizarre ★★★★
7. After The Fall ★★
9. Georgie And Her Rival ★★★
9. So Like Candy ★★★★
10. Interlude: Couldn't Call It Unexpected No 2 ★★
11. Playboy To A Man ★★
12. Sweet Pear ★★★
13. Broken ★★
14. Couldn't Call It Unexpected No 4 ★★★★★

Label: Warner Brothers
Produced by: Elvis Costello, Mitchell Froom, Kevin Killen
Recorded at: Ocean Way, Hollywood; Westside Studios, London
Personnel: Elvis Costello (acoustic/electric guitar, bass, maracas, keyboards), Mitchell Froom (organ, celeste, harmonium), Larry Knechtel (organ, piano, Hammond organ, clavinet), Marc Ribot (guitar, cornet, horn), Jerry Scheff (bass, electric guitar), Jim Keltner (drums, percussion), Benmont Tench (piano), Pete Thomas (drums, percussion), Efrem Towns (trumpet), Rob Wasserman (electric bass), T-Bone Wolk (bass), Nick Lowe (bass), Lionel Batiste (drums), Nicholas Bucknail (clarinet), James Burton (acoustic guitar), Gregory Davis (trumpet), Andre Findon (flute), Steve George (backing vocals), Charles Joseph (trombone), Kirk Joseph (tuba), Roger Lewis (baritone sax), Ross MacManus (trumpet), Jenell Marshall (drums, perc), Richard Morgan (oboe), Steve Nieve (keys), Richard Page (bk vcl), Simon Rayner (French horn); Steven Soles (bk vcl)
Highest chart position: UK 5; 55 US

THE JULIET LETTERS

Rock'n'roll, where art thou? A confounding, undervalued hook-up with The Brodsky Quartet.

BY ANDREW MUELLER

RELEASED JANUARY 19, 1993

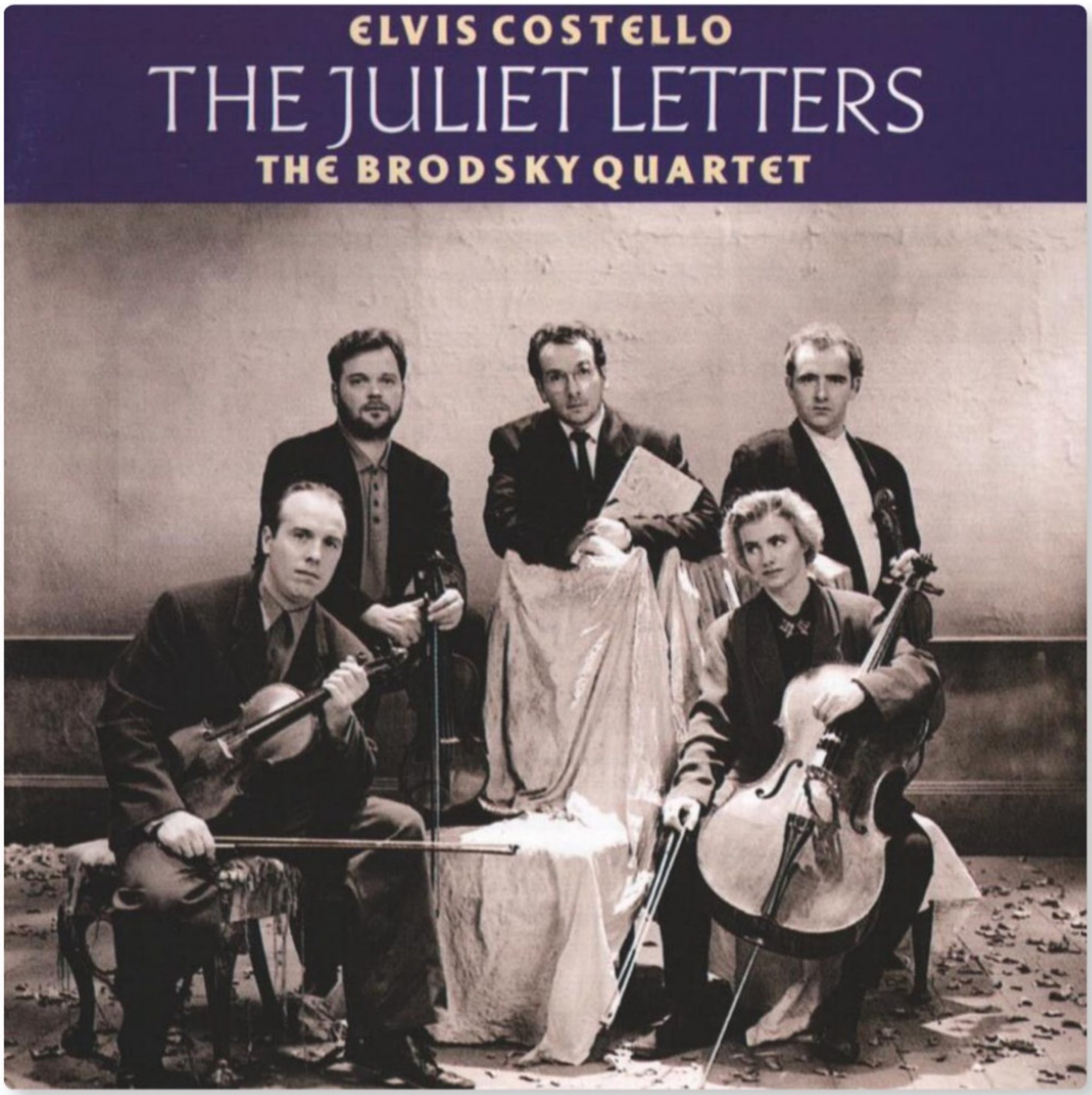
"THIS IS NO more my stab at 'classical music' than it is the Brodsky Quartet's first rock and roll album," declared Elvis Costello in the (extensive) sleevenotes of the original release of *The Juliet Letters*. A measure of defensiveness was understandable. As Costello had learned the hard way, over 13 previous albums of restless reinvention and innovation, and the often bewildered and/or outraged response to same, rock fans – for all their rebel posturing – are often extremely conservative and possessive people.

There was indeed reason to fear that those who would have preferred he never outgrew the sweaty, splenetic, knock-kneed, misanthropic punk rocker on the cover of *My Aim Is True* and *This Year's Model* might be other than welcoming of what was – and there was really no getting around this – an emotionally complex concept album made in cahoots with serious string players. Or, as a senior figure at one music weekly remarked when the first violin trills of the brief instrumental fanfare "Deliver Us" were broadcast across the office, "Has the King of Albania died or something?"

The suspicions engendered by *The Juliet Letters* were mostly to the effect that Costello was being deliberately and obtusely whimsical and/or insane and vainglorious and/or was making a clumsy and faintly pitiable attempt to be taken seriously. The last of these was convincingly debunked by Costello himself in the (even more extensive) sleevenotes of the 2006 reissue of *The Juliet Letters* ("Clearly, anyone who made such a statement had little or no knowledge of critical hyperbole that can rain down on even the slightest talent before the bloom goes off the romance in pop music. I had found myself being taken too seriously and over-analysed from the very outset of my recording career.") The other accusations were rather more a reflection on those making them than the object of them: imagination and ambition seem strange insults to level at any artist, or indeed anyone.

The more prosaic truth of the gestation of *The Juliet Letters* was that Costello had chanced across a newspaper article about a Veronese professor who had taken to replying to the correspondence the city apparently received addressed to Juliet Capulet. Costello, not unreasonably, was intrigued by the idea of what people might be writing to a fictional or at any rate long-dead character, and what one could possibly say in reply. At around the same time, he was entranced by The Brodsky Quartet's performances of Shostakovich's string quartets at Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, and over the next few years became a regular at their concerts – unaware, as he tells it, that the Brodskys had also been to see him play more than once. They began discussing working together in 1991, and *The Juliet Letters* was premiered in London and Darlington in the summer of 1992, after which the album was recorded, live in the studio.

The Juliet Letters is a punctiliously equal collaboration: Costello contributes to the music, the Brodskys to the words. For all that, *The Juliet Letters*, like few other Costello albums before or since – *North* is perhaps the only comparison – is dominated by Costello's singing voice. This is understandable – he'd cut that unmistakeable serrated whine to be heard against vastly more clamorous backing. And it's mostly no problem at all, at least for listeners who have acquired what remains a divisive taste. His impersonation of a vindictive grandmother plotting disinheritance on "I Almost Had A Weakness" owes much to such previous sanctimoniously enraged



THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"There are moments of extravagant catchiness... the shame is that, while his last few albums have been praised beyond their worth, this – a bold, flawed, encouraging affair – is probably on course for a pasting by virtue of not being a rock record." STUART MACONIE, NME, JANUARY 23, 1993

"*The Juliet Letters* is perhaps the most uncompromising album of his career. It is also the most compelling thing he's done in years." ALLAN JONES, MELODY MAKER, JANUARY 23, 1993

outbursts as "Blue Chair" and "How To Be Dumb"; "This Sad Burlesque" is a descendant of such beard-era baroque triumphs as "All Grown Up" and "God's Comic", and his ominous muttering of "For Other Eyes" recalls "Pills & Soap" (a Brodskyfied version of which would form part of the encore at live performances of *The Juliet Letters*).

But the worst and best moments of *The Juliet Letters* are those at which Costello tries to find new voices for this new context. On "Swine", he affects a nasal, declamatory bark to suit a screed of deranged ranting ("*You're a swine and I'm saying that's an insult to the pig*"), but sounds perhaps too convincingly like a ragged-trousered itinerant barking at traffic outside an off-licence. Similarly, the hoarse barrow-boy yelp of "This Offer Is Unrepeatable" suits the chain-letter huckster narrating the lyric, but entices the repeat listener as little as spam of this sort ("*Ignore at your peril this splendid advice*") entices sane recipients. On a few other tracks, especially "Romeo's Seance" and "The First To Leave", Costello could perhaps have afforded to rein in his sometimes hyperactively tremulous vibrato just a little.

But when he properly hits it, he's magnificent. The creeping, obsessive "Taking My Life In Your Hands", the glorious show-stopper that heralded the intermission in live performances of *The Juliet Letters*, builds slowly and sumptuously to a crescendo that Costello surely has no hope of reaching, until he does, at which he suddenly resembles some seething, vindictive cousin of Bobby Hatfield (a compliment, in these circumstances).

The Brodsky Quartet are predictably extraordinary throughout, as capable of the stately and restrained ("The Letter Home", "This Sad Burlesque") as they are of the playful and poppy. "Jacksons, Monk & Rowe", for all that it was mostly written by the Brodskys' Michael and Jacqueline Thomas, would have fitted seamlessly onto one of Costello's more arranged albums – *Imperial Bedroom*, say, or *Spike*. It says much about the seamlessness of Costello's association with The Brodsky Quartet that it barely seemed remarkable when they did pop up on a couple of his subsequent albums, playing on a track each of *All This Useless Beauty* and *North*, or when Costello appeared on their *Mood Swings*.

No Elvis Costello album has been so witheringly pre-judged as *The Juliet Letters*. It may be for that reason that it rarely features among lists of his best works. Indeed, it must be that, because there's not a lot wrong with the songs.

TRACKMARKS THE JULIET LETTERS

1. Deliver Us ★★★
2. For Other Eyes ★★★
3. Swine ★★
4. Expert Rites ★★★★
5. Dead Letter ★★★★
6. I Almost Had A Weakness ★★★★
7. Why? ★★★
8. Who Do You Think You Are? ★★★★
9. Taking My Life In Your Hands ★★★★★
10. This Offer Is Unrepeatable ★★
11. Dear Sweet Filthy World ★★★★
12. The Letter Home ★★★★
13. Jacksons, Monk & Rowe ★★★★
14. This Sad Burlesque ★★★★
15. Romeo's Seance ★★★
16. I Thought I'd Write To Juliet ★★★
17. Last Post ★★★
18. The First To Leave ★★★
19. Damnation's Cellar ★★★
20. The Birds Will Still Be Singing ★★★★

Label: Warner Brothers
Produced by: Kevin Killen, Elvis Costello, The Brodsky Quartet
Recorded at: Church Studios, London
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals), Michael Thomas (violin), Ian Belton (violin), Paul Cassidy (viola), Jacqueline Thomas (cello)
Highest chart position: UK 18; US 125

"It's dangerous to become complacent..."

After the beard and the Brodsky Quartet, EC and The Attractions get back to basics... "Watch out now! I don't want to use that dreaded phrase," he warns JOHN MULVEY, before a state-of-the-nation skree that touches on Nirvana, Mikhail Gorbachev, child murders and, inevitably, the secret life of the Tory Party.

IT'S THE CONFIDENCE that strikes you first. The piercing, lively eyes. The sharp opinions delivered with fierce intensity. The absolute certainty in every long, articulate answer. If Elvis Costello has any regrets, 18 years on, he's far too self-assured to show them.

Pop stars are meant to be superior, of course: snotty, arrogant, desperately, glamorously untouchable. This, though, is a different breed; one with distinct presence, authority and a high seriousness that would seem ridiculous coming from 99 per cent of those who pass through these pages week in, week out. If not quite capable of anything, Costello is at least convinced he's capable of most things. The post-punk Renaissance man, the amphetamine Buddy Holly, the authentic speccy git, has grown up – still madly ambitious, still Britain's best lyricist by a country mile – to be the supreme thinking man's rock star, a real statesman.

In theory it's a hateful idea. It reeks of complacency, and *hauteur*, of the *Unplugged* generation slipping on an Armani suit and tossing off two hours' worth of po-faced 'classics' in the Albert Hall. Imagine, then, being assaulted by raw garage pop drenched in boiling adrenalin instead, pocket rants packed with neat, vituperative wisdom. This is the new Costello album *Brutal Youth* – as ruthless and gritty a record as a man nudging 40 could dream of making. Though he may dress like a consort of Clapton, may occasionally talk in paragraphs shaped for a Sunday supplement, Elvis Costello is still, emphatically, on our side.

KEITH MORRIS/REDFERNS

Outside, in Holland Park, the embittered, gaudy, sulky and plain psychotic people who populate *Brutal Youth* go about their tiny, horrid lives. Inside, in the plush and panelled hotel that's also currently home to Snoop Doggy Dogg, the smartest man in pop is holding court.

You may be surprised to find him here, back in *NME*, in 1994. After all, he has been widely regarded – erroneously, as it happens – as having lost the plot about five years ago. The *Spike* and *Mighty Like A Rose* albums – densely textured, sprawling, alienating – were given mixed critical receptions. Both contained fine songs so smothered by over-ambition you could be excused for missing them entirely; why use one guitar, they seemed to suggest, when five pianos, a New Orleans brass band and an Irish folk group would do? And when last year's ornate song cycle with the Brodsky string quartet, *The Juliet Letters*, stepped out, its charms were ignored and the image of a man spiralling off into new zones of pretension was perpetuated.

"YOU KNOW WHAT? YOU DON'T ALWAYS HAVE TO BE TRYING TO STROKE THE AUDIENCE..."
ELVIS COSTELLO

It all conspired to obscure the fact that deep down, beneath the frills and flights of composer fantasy, there was still an almost indecent number of exceptional songs. People began to conveniently forget how Costello had sprung back from allegedly unacceptable tangents in the past: remember the blank bafflement that greeted 1981's country covers album, *Almost Blue*; or this paper's epitaph-like single review of the rickety "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" in 1986? We are, ultimately, talking about a man who has spent a career as a dyed-in-the-wool perverse bastard.

Which is why the rough greatness of *Brutal Youth* – a record that'll have old retainers and youngblood newcomers alike screaming with joy – hardly comes as a shock. Emerging from where his recording career began, in Highbury's Pathway Studios, and with all the old Attractions gradually corralled one by one to play along, it's an unforgiving, beautifully seedy-sounding record. Channelled loathing rather than blind rage is his main trick now, but through 15 crumbling vignettes, it makes for as vicious a state-of-the-decaying-nation address as anyone could hope for. Something of a 'back to basics' record, in fact...

"Watch out now!" Elvis Costello leans forward in his chair. He speaks jokily, but only just. "That sounds uncomfortably close to the current political philosophy. I don't want to use that dreaded phrase. I think actually if I ran now I'd have a pretty good chance of getting in."

Brutal Youth is very different to something as cluttered and complex as *Mighty Like A Rose*, though.

"Before it becomes a real re-conversion back to an old religion or something, I think *Mighty*

Cutting remarks: Costello with The Attractions, 1994

With The Brodsky Quartet (from the *Juliet Letters* cover shoot); and (inset) with the beard, Hammersmith Odeon, July 5, 1991

Like A Rose is seen as being all one kind of music, when it's quite diverse. It was just the decision to make *Brutal Youth* all combo music, which was totally conscious. And then, little by little, it ended up with me bringing Steve [Nieve, *pianist*] in, then I asked Nick [Lowe] to play bass... It wasn't as if some guy with a big cigar came in and said [*cue Groucho Marx voice*], 'Hey, you know what? Let's get The Attractions back together.' For one thing, I think none of the guys would've done it for that reason alone. A couple of us hadn't even spoken to each other for a couple of years."

Brutal Youth is, in many ways, the most singularly 'Elvis Costello' record Elvis Costello's ever made. While in the past it was easy to spot influences – a touch of Stax here, a daub of Gram Parsons there, a shitload of Lennonesque invective pretty much everywhere – here the main influence seems to be his own back catalogue; the elemental rumble of *This Year's Model* or *Trust*, say. As becomes the pattern, he has a good crack at evading the point.

"In the past I've used ironic music – 'Oliver's Army', a serious song with very light music. With this, I've got the advantage now that people know certain things from older records, so I can play off that knowledge. So a song like 'Just About Glad' is about a guy looking back at when he was 21, when he thought he was a great lad, and trying to kid himself that it was all right that these things didn't work out. But the music is the music that he was listening to then.

"In my mind," he contradicts, "the bass part at least has a bit of the Faces about it in that it plays the tune – like Ron Wood used to do. I imagine it's not me so much but the people that used to torture me in The Crow's Nest in Widnes to hear Rod's songs when I was 17. You know, they'd come up and want to hear 'Cum On Feel The Noize' and there'd be two of us with acoustic guitars come to sing our folk songs, our teenage angst songs.

"But you know what, if somebody just wants to hear it as a loud song that they dig, that's fine too. I'm not saying you have to – hey! – understand my irony. I don't give a shit, it's there to be read either way."

Such self-absorption is all well and good, but Costello isn't always quite so easygoing. His livid reaction to criticism of *The Juliet Letters*, for example, actually obscured the fact that the album was, in general, reasonably well-received. One writer who slagged it off received a snapping and wounded letter in reply.

"You know what?" He becomes intense, passionate, a little proud. "There's a certain responsibility on my part to stand up for my collaborators [*The Brodsky Quartet*], because they're drawn into a petty-minded media position which is informed entirely by my back history, not theirs. Perhaps it was ill-advised to write; you should probably always be above it. But right at that moment I got furious because I felt it was unfair to those guys. They didn't ask for any of that shit, or some tired old hack like Tony Parsons taking us to task, trying to pretend to be dangerous by writing for the *Telegraph*.

"But in the long run, the whole reason for shouting at somebody about anything is it gets it out of your head. Now it can be an important thing that really is close to your heart, or it can just be something that fucking pisses you off. You shout, and then it's gone, and after that it doesn't matter."

That kind of anger, that forceful energy, seems to inform the new songs.

"Maybe so. I think there are more important things to focus your aggression on. It's not like you're contriving to feel angry; you feel about something what you feel about it, and you can either express it or you can't."

But one sentiment that fills the record – especially on "20 Per Cent Amnesia" – is that you're never too old to be angry.

"Well, I think it's a bit dangerous to become complacent, when you start accepting stuff that you used to think was unacceptable. And I think there are a lot of things that are unacceptable. They're different to you as you get older, you become more forgiving about certain frailties of other people. And at the same time you become absolutely unforgiving about things which perhaps you were too self-centred to even realise were happening in the past. In certain periods of my life I've had blinkers on."

"I'M NOT SAYING YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND MY IRONY... I DON'T GIVE A SHIT"
ELVIS COSTELLO

Are there any old songs where you think your rage is petty now?

"If it was real to me then, it was real to me. It's no good me saying now, 'Well, as the Grand Old Man...' I don't feel like the Grand Old Man!"

Do you listen much to your old records?

"I did recently – it sounds like I should be sat with a glass balloon of brandy, and a doberman perched on my arm, running my old videos on a big screen. But I had to recently because of the boxset [*1993's Two And A Half Years collection of the first three albums plus a live CD*]. Every time I listen to them I change my mind. *Armed Forces* I liked much better than the last time I'd heard it. I'd got to think it was a very glib-sounding record, but maybe because everything's got much more slick, it now sounds very rough round the edges. If you compare it to a Michael Bolton record it sounds like Howlin' Wolf."

What about the last three records?

Mighty Like A Rose drew a lot of criticism.

"You know what it was? It was the beard. The beard freaked people out. The beard was seen like, 'Oh, he's lost his mind.' It was also my turn – I was comparatively bulletproof until *Mighty Like A Rose*. Even *Spike*, when a lot of people freaked out and said it was over-ambitious or pretentious or whatever. Who cares? I like it, 750,000 people like it, so you can go fuck yourself, basically!

"But I do mean it quite literally, the beard did alarm people; 'Oh God! What's that?' Because whether I like it or not, some people see me as representative of some time or attitude, that I've got to be angry or on the edge, and if I've got a beard... that represents something else. Are people as easily fooled as that? I think some of the best tunes I've ever written are on that record; maybe they're not presented in the most ingratiating way. But you know what? Maybe I *meant* to do that. You don't always have to be trying to stroke the audience.

"People always want their artists to be tortured. I'm harder on myself than anyone can be, believe me. It's the way I wanted it to be; if you don't like it... then, fine, there are other records to listen to. Nobody's forcing you. It's this idea that I have to live up to something, it only comes from people that maybe worry a little bit too hard, because they've been paying attention all along and they feel you owe them something. There's nothing in my contract anywhere – with myself, with the devil – that says I have to mean anything to anybody but myself."

A PARCEL FROM THE record company arrives, and is thrown onto the seat beside Costello. He welcomes the distraction, then gets back to what is obviously a prickly subject.

"It's probably a letter bomb. It's a Valentine's card. It's another false beard – 'We like the beard after all, we've had a conference, we want you to go back to the beard, the kids love it.'

"You know what I think? It's like that terrible saying, 'We'll look back at this and laugh.' I see changes happen to things that I thought would never end, like kinds of music that get on your nerves and then they vanish, or personalities on the radio – 'God, is that guy ever gonna get off the air?' – and then he does. You know what? You just live. It's not the end of the world.

"You wouldn't put all this effort and work into making the stuff detailed if you didn't think it

STEVE GILLETT

was worth people looking, but there's also a point where you have to be aware that there's another point of view which just accepts music like oxygen, in a much less considered and serious way, with much less concentration on detail."

That's very phlegmatic. Do you ever get too serious and obsessive about your music?

"Me? No, I think you've got to take it seriously. This record has some music in it which might appear at first hearing to be like something I've done before. But I don't in any way mean to suggest that – hey! – you have to understand distance in order to appreciate this, 'cos I'm having great fun. Like I never got to play guitar so loud before this one.

"The clearest example of what I'm trying to say is in '13 Steps Lead Down' – *'You can tie me up and do anything you want with me, but just turn off that ugly drug music'*. And that ugly drug music happens, you know. There doesn't have to be all this incredible ambiguity about music. It's just literal. And you know what? Playing that guitar is really good fun. I like making a noise."

Does it piss you off that people are going to say, "Well, he's been arsing around for three LPs, but now he's gone back to what he's good at"?

"Well, it'll save them having to think, or listen to the songs..."

Around the time of *Mighty Like A Rose*, Costello told an interviewer, "People try very hard to think of earnest things to say about the world in music, but to my mind it's a sort of macabre comedy." That sick sense of farce is even more prevalent on *Brutal Youth*, from the *Absolutely Fabulous*-style scenario of "Pony Street", through a succession of songs brilliantly coloured by sexual violence and fetishism, to "This Is Hell", an insane and vivid parade of grotesquerie where he seems to be coming to terms with all that long-nurtured misanthropy.

"Maybe the world's become more macabre, and more comic as well," he says now. "For all my efforts to not be despairing on the last record, when I listen to it I hear more despair than on this one, where maybe it's just got so ludicrous now."

It certainly seems so on "Kinder Murder", a song that briskly but evocatively embraces cruel sex, abandonment, unwanted pregnancy and, eventually, child murder, then sets it all to a pumping, nagging bastard of a tune.

"I had this figure, this picture in my mind of a Norman Tebbit head, a sort of guy who believed any kind of liberal attitude was a disaster, and therefore believed in the strictest moral code – that's what interests me now. There's no loss of immediacy, or confidence, or belief in what I'm saying. In some ways you're able to be more brutally honest about things that are unpleasant to talk about, even about things in yourself. But less self-regarding and much less self-indulgent – like, there's a lot of this [*he mimes slashing his wrists*] pity-me music around now, and because there's so much of it, I'm doing it this way. Maybe that's being perverse, but I've made records where they're very literal and straight out of my head, like *Blood & Chocolate*."

So is your predilection for this kind of writing influenced by your personal life being settled now, by a sense of contentment?

"No, but I think it does afford you the ability to focus any aggression onto worthy targets rather than just the momentary frustration of having to speak in guarded ways because it's more painful to somebody else. It's useful to look at things that've really happened with a little bit of distance but no less heartfelt feeling. That maybe you didn't have the courage to say when you were supposed to be so confessional and so real. I guess 'Still Too Soon To Know' would be an example of that. And then there's the tiring negative complexities of living a wild – if wild's the right word – complicated life."

It was wild, though, wasn't it? Didn't The Attractions have a reputation for being one of the most hedonistic bands around?

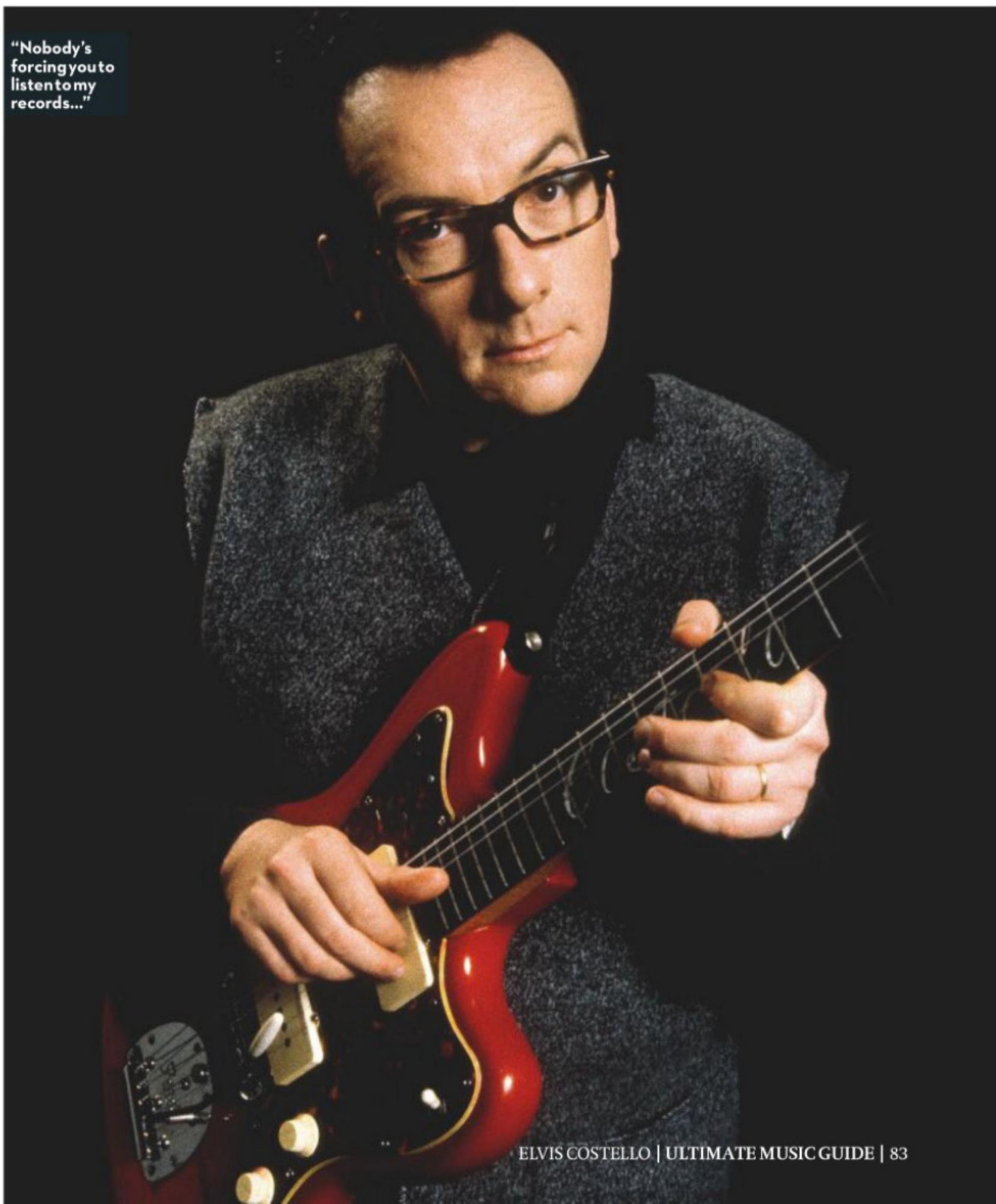
"I suppose so, yeah. But the very last thing I'm gonna do is say, 'Hey man, we were really wild, you kids don't understand, you're just beginners. You Nirvana – ha! Piece of cake.' It's real to that moment. I think it's genuinely funny to watch somebody go through the moment when they wanna be real, and the moment where they resist fame, and the moment where they give into it. I know what it feels like."

HE COULD TALK all night, and probably will. There is, after all, always something sick and stupid to rail against, to target for a lashing. That's why Elvis Costello is – and it's a cliché, but an unavoidable one – just as relevant now as he ever has been, because he still cares enough to have a go. The fact that he can destroy something more eloquently, more rigorously than damn near anyone else – in conversation as well as in song – is just a bonus. It's that care, too, that makes his music swing from the elaborate kinks of his last three albums to the base nastiness of *Brutal Youth*. A deathless desire to experiment. The last words on *Mighty Like A Rose* were "*I can't believe I'll never believe in anything again*". Some people didn't believe him. Fools.

"I read a review of the new record that says it's nostalgia. I went, 'Wow! When did I become nostalgic?' And I'm not. But then I'm not supposed to; I'm nostalgic about different things that mean the same in my life as perhaps some of my music does to other people. If you're just the right age, then of course it's gonna have that little special place, and everybody's got a record, or two, or 2,000 that they feel that way about.

"And I'm glad that I'm one of them, but it doesn't mean that I want to make a living out of that impulse. I still want to be able to juggle with the bits and come up with something that makes it worthwhile. And when it isn't, then I guess that will be time to pack it in.

"But," and he speaks, as ever, with absolute confidence, "it isn't any time soon."



"Nobody's forcing you to listen to my records..."

ESTATE OF KEITH MORRIS REDFERNS

BRUTAL YOUTH

The Attractions accidentally reform, as EC returns to the rough stuff. "*His almost universal excellence is starting to disturb me!*" BY JON DALE

RELEASED MARCH 8, 1994

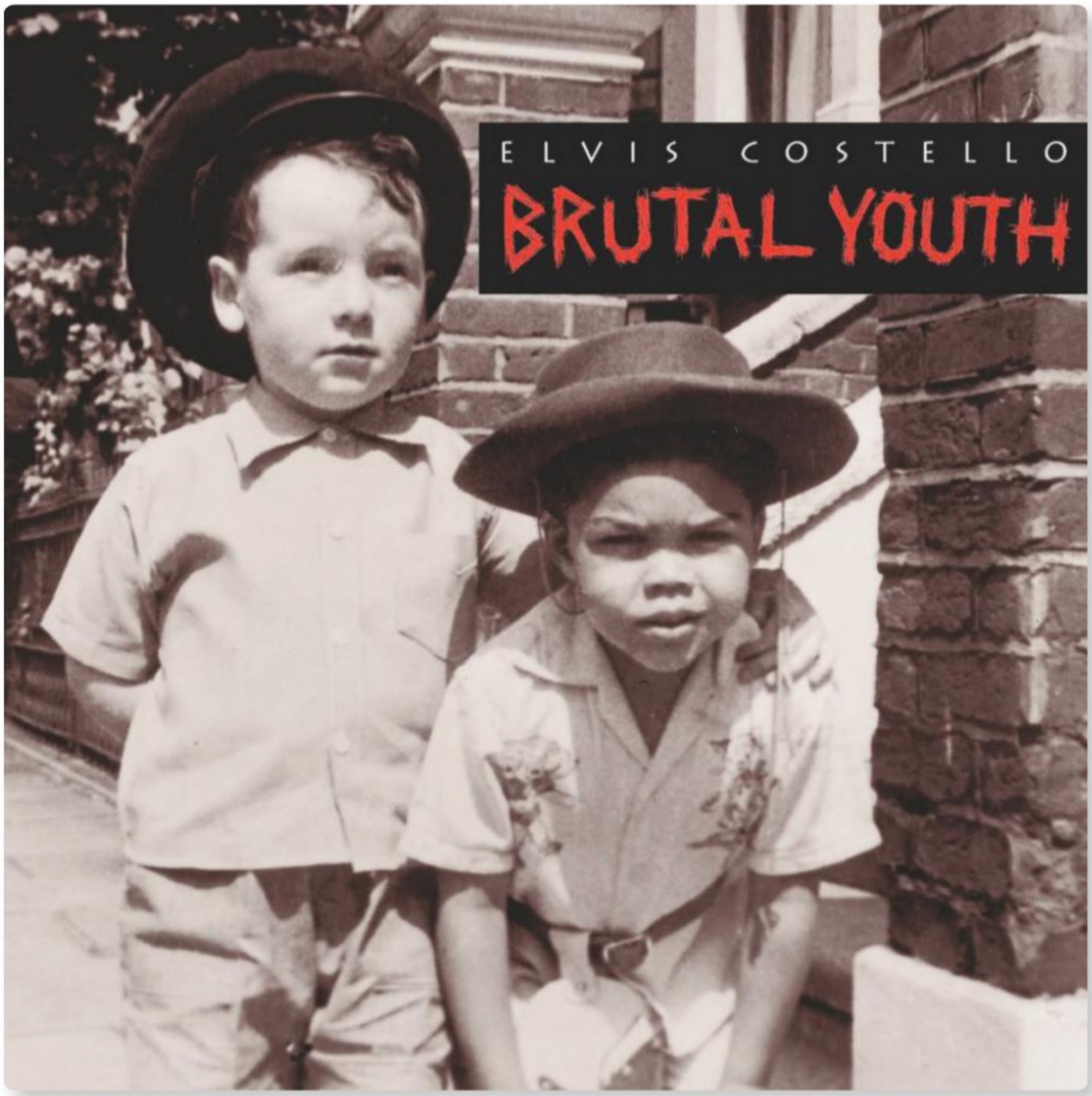
AFTER THE ELABORATIONS of 1991's *Mighty Like A Rose* and 1993's collaboration with The Brodsky Quartet, *The Juliet Letters*, it felt a little like Costello was painting himself into a corner. An ornate one, where the songs were still enduring and compelling – *The Juliet Letters* in particular – but a corner nonetheless. One of the great myths of the record-release-tour cycle, though, is that of logical chronology, that x follows y follows z. In Costello's world, things tend to be a little less clear-cut.

So, in the same year as *The Juliet Letters*, the dedicated Costello fan would have found themselves shelling out coin for the debut solo album by ex-Transvision Vamp lead singer Wendy James, *Now Ain't The Time For Your Tears*. Costello had been approached to contribute a song to James' debut solo album, and countered with an offer to write the whole thing – a typically all-or-nothing gesture. Costello sent James 10 songs, some co-written with his wife Cait O'Riordan, on a tape where he'd blasted out rough versions with Pete Thomas on drums. Thomas carried over to the album, but what resulted was a bit of a curate's egg: the finished product, airbrushed and glossed, doesn't necessarily play to the immediate strengths of Costello's songs, but neither is it the debacle many claim – songs like "London's Brilliant" have a sweet snarkiness to them that James carries off with aplomb.

Costello and Thomas had also been working on a project called Idiophone, with roughs recorded back in Pathway Studios. (Costello's musical, which he was working on at the same time, is yet to see the light.) This project then mutated, slowly but surely, into *Brutal Youth*, an album that brought back together, for the first time since 1986, The Attractions, with Nieve first joining the fold, while bass duties were filled out by Nick Lowe and then Bruce Thomas; producer Mitchell Froom had been working with the ex-Attraction on Suzanne Vega's elliptical folk-rock masterpiece *99.9°F*. And if you're wondering why Lowe only appears on some of the songs, Costello's liner notes for *Brutal Youth* explain: "Nick, who has always remained understated about his instrumental abilities, claimed that [*the ballads*] simply contained 'too many Norwegians' for his style of playing. In other words: too many damn chords."

It may have come about by a series of connections and fortuitous circumstances, but once you hear the songs on *Brutal Youth*, it's hard to believe Costello wasn't writing with The Attractions in mind. Perhaps that was going on at a subconscious level, a return to the old gang after the different terrain he'd been traversing in recent years. Perhaps, too, there was something in Costello being around the corner from turning 40, and making peace with former selves. He wasn't above mocking his achievements as a genre-leaping, master-of-all-trades songwriter, either – "My Science Fiction Twin" features the quick-witted quips, "*His almost universal excellence is starting to disturb me/They asked how in the world he does all these things/And he answered, superbly.*"

There's also a palpable sense of rejuvenation in the air throughout *Brutal Youth*, an occasional moment of collective scores settled, and a simple roughhousing joy in playing the guitar rather fucking loud with an exceptional band in tow. Just don't call it 'back to basics' – there's rather more going on here than you think at first blush. Opening with three songs that flood the sensorium with visceral playing, clanging guitars, spittle, invective, observational rage, humour – "Pony St", "Kinder Murder" and "13 Steps Lead Down" – The Attractions are playing with fire under their feet as Costello reels off a catalogue of brutalities and indiscretions.



THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"Elvis Costello has made an album that sounds like a debut, with all the fire and fury that entails, and he has brought to it a wise man's brain and wit." DAVID QUANTICK, NME, MARCH 5, 1994

"This is vitriolic and perversely, blindingly romantic. This is another bitch of an album from the old dog.... You grow out of most flashes in the pan. Lightning like this you grow into." CHRIS ROBERTS, MELODY MAKER, FEBRUARY 26, 1994

The ageing hipster mother of "Pony St" is upbraiding her daughter for being a square, while playing the fly-by-night radicalism of the '60s for its shallow core: "*If you're going out tonight/I won't wait up/Reading Das Kapital/Watching Home Shopping Club.*"

Reflecting on the song while talking to Bill Flanagan, Costello confessed, "One of the things I got the story off was a review I read of Guns N' Roses in one of the English papers. The journalist asked this seven-year-old girl which one of Guns N' Roses she liked most and she said, 'I like Axl Rose 'cos my mummy says he puts a cucumber down his trousers.' And I thought, well, there it is – there's rock'n'roll neutered forever." Some of *Brutal Youth* moves that moment of disappointment into other contexts, like the 'fantasy afterlife' nightclub/Don Juan nightmare of "This Is Hell", where "My Favourite Things" tortures the speakers – "*It's by Julie Andrews/And not by John Coltrane.*" Or "13 Steps Lead Down", which pulls together a tale of visiting the tombs of Spanish kings, a pun on the 12-step programme, and a sinister bondage diorama.

"13 Steps Lead Down", the album's second single after "Sulky Girl", was furious and thrilling. But then, after the regal "This Is Hell", Costello goes back to his soul roots with "Clown Strike", "You Tripped At Every Step" and then later, "Rocking Horse Road". These aren't quite as successful, feeling like Costello is revisiting some of the terrain of *Get Happy!!*; but without the cohesive vision of that album, they're left feeling a little anomalous. Elsewhere, though, Costello leaps around with conviction and canniness: certainly, following up the melodramatic, melancholy poise of "Still Too Soon To Know", the arrangement naked and wilting, with the strained, warped rockabilly stroll of "20 Per Cent Amnesia" is a confident move, proof of a group playing together near the peak of their powers.

If *Brutal Youth* suffers from anything, it's a slight dip in quality in its second half – there are still good songs filling the album's back end, but "Just About Glad" and "All The Rage" recast stronger moments from earlier in the record. Closing with the beautiful piano-and-voice shiver and sigh of "Favourite Hour" helps to pull the album together, though, its dark intensity a late-night reflection of the ferocity of those three opening salvos. And there, *Brutal Youth*'s strangely circular logic reaches its destination, an album that reconnects Costello with his past and fires him off into a future uncertain, but with one of his more potent sets of songs in his back pocket. It's no real surprise that he would turn the corner and give us another set of covers – as if to say that, at least right now, he couldn't top *Brutal Youth*'s brutal pleasures.

TRACKMARKS BRUTAL YOUTH

1. Pony St ★★★★
2. Kinder Murder ★★★★
3. 13 Steps Lead Down ★★★★
4. This Is Hell ★★★★
5. Clown Strike ★★
6. You Tripped At Every Step ★★★
7. Still Too Soon To Know ★★★★
8. 20 Per Cent Amnesia ★★★
9. Sulky Girl ★★★★
10. London's Brilliant Parade ★★★★
11. My Science Fiction Twin ★★★★
12. Rocking Horse Road ★★★
13. Just About Glad ★★★
14. All The Rage ★★★
15. Favourite Hour ★★★★

Label: Warner Bros
Produced by: Mitchell Froom
Recorded at: The Sound Factory, Hollywood
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitar, piano, bass), Steve Nieve (piano, organ, harmonium), Bruce Thomas, Nick Lowe (bass), Pete Thomas (drums, perc)
Highest chart position: UK 2; US 34

KOJAK VARIETY

Hidden charms! Mercifully rescued from the archives: a crate-digging covers set recorded on an all-star jaunt to Barbados. BY GARRY MULHOLLAND

RELEASED MAY 9, 1995

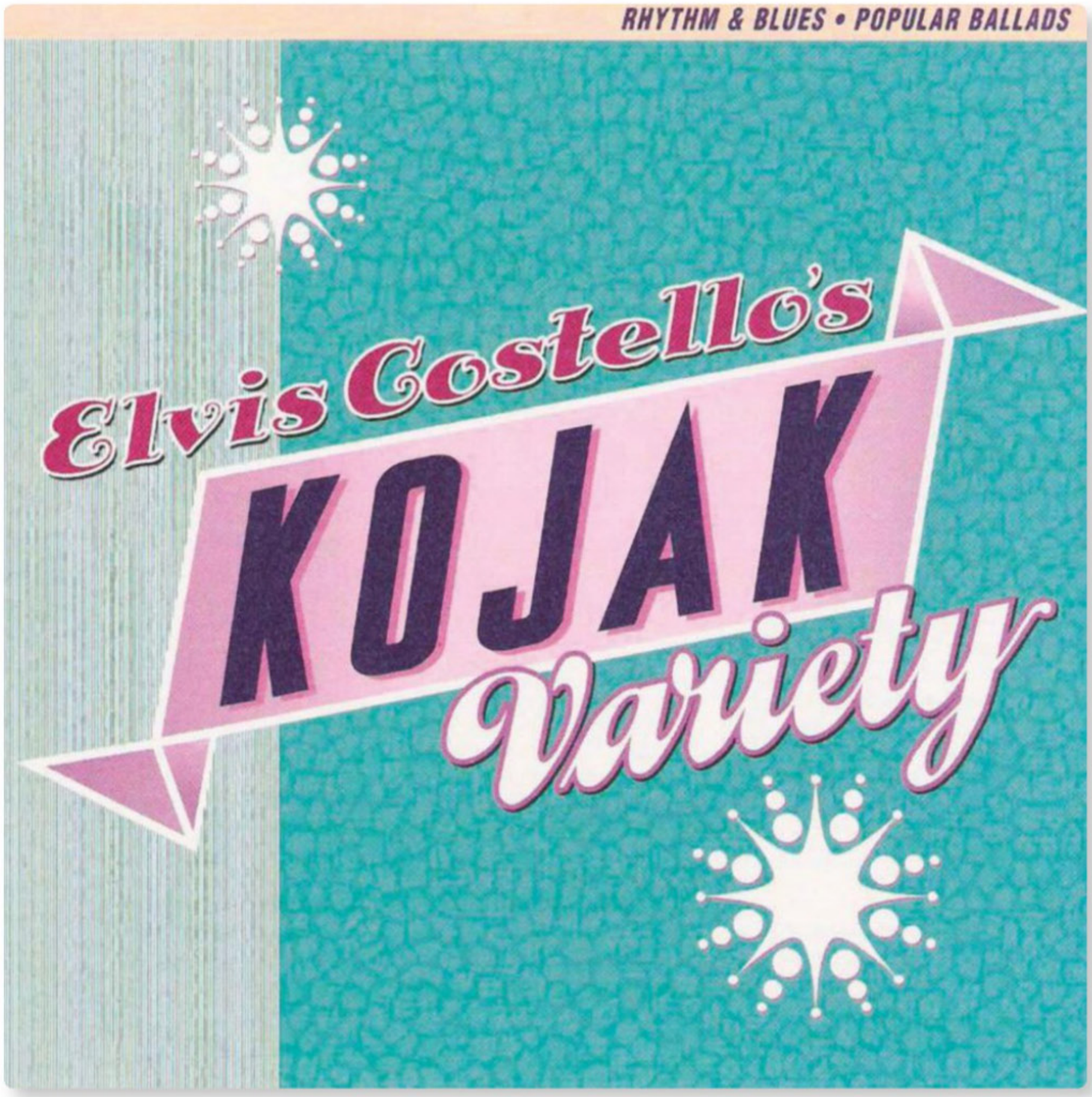
AFOR A CELEBRATED songwriter, Elvis Costello has recorded and performed an awful lot of covers. *Kojak Variety* might stand as only his second, and thus far final, album of cover versions, but by 1995 Costello had released over 40 interpretations of other songwriters' material, and the 2004 remastered edition of *Kojak Variety* came complete with a bonus CD comprising a further 20 previously unreleased covers recorded by Costello in the 1990s. These included such obvious classics as Lennon/McCartney's "You've Got To Hide Your Love Away", Chips Moman and Dan Penn's soul standard "The Dark End Of The Street" and Bruce Springsteen's "Brilliant Disguise", the latter two as part of a private demo for Costello's country hero, George Jones.

But, for the original *Kojak Variety*, Costello was in full crate-rummaging record collector mode; selecting 15 tunes dominated by obscure album tracks and B-sides from the 1950s and '60s, dominated by soul, rhythm 'n' blues and country, in which only two songs – British dance bandleader Ray Noble's "The Very Thought Of You" and Ray Davies' much-loved "Days" – were not written by Americans.

It's no surprise, then, that the small band chosen to back Costello on this reverent tribute to American roots is largely comprised of US session royalty. Guitarists James Burton and Marc Ribot, drummer Jim Keltner, keyboardist Larry Knechtel and bassist Jerry Scheff are the kind of legends who can include names such as Presley, Dylan, Lennon, Cash, Waits, The Beach Boys and The Doors on their CVs, although Costello also found room for his loyal Attractions sticksman Pete Thomas. What may come as more of a surprise is the almost-offhand nature of the album's genesis.

In 1990, Costello had planned to follow *Spike* with an album with The Attractions. But the negotiations became, according to Costello's own liner notes for *Kojak Variety*, "a theatre for delusions and long harboured grudges", and the Attractions reunion was shelved. Instead, Costello decided that a fortnight in the Caribbean with musicians he had worked with in touring band The Confederates and, in Ribot's case, the *Spike* sessions, would be a lot more fun than squabbling with old friends. Cue two weeks at Blue Wave Studios in Barbados, dodging mongooses and battling with Costello's untimely bout of laryngitis. The odd, Telly Savalas-referencing title came from a grocery store near the studio that Costello felt reflected the arcane, pick-'n'-mix nature of the *Kojak Variety* material.

Costello wanted label Warner Brothers to just throw the album out as a low-key release somewhere between 1991's *Mighty Like A Rose* and his 1993 Brodsky Quartet collaboration *The Juliet Letters*. But major labels don't cough up for trips to Barbados only to slip the resulting sessions out unnoticed. Consequently, *Kojak Variety* occupies a strange position in the Costello canon: a somewhat out-of-place intermission between Costello's final albums with The Attractions. This affected the confused critical response more than anything else, as fans delighted by *Brutal Youth*'s return to the raging, feral beat-pop of Costello's early days were suddenly expected to get happy about a set that, in places, sounded like a rarefied version of a Jools Holland blues-jam on *Later*.



THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"Costello's voice is distinctive enough to make some of the songs his own... the fact that he can do cover versions better than most doesn't make this a success. It simply means the competition is weak." AMY RAPHAEL, NME, MAY 13, 1995

"*Kojak Variety* is an engaging detour. It takes a gigantic ego to even consider making records like this, and yet larger talent to make records like this that work. In both areas, Elvis Costello has been in a league of one for a mighty long time." ANDREW MUELLER, MELODY MAKER, MAY 27, 1995

Therefore, the opening workmanlike brawl with the Screaming Jay Hawkins B-side "Strange" has you fearing the worst, as do Little Willie John's "Leave My Kitten Alone", a misguided Little Richard impression on "Bama Lama Bama Loo", a messy stomp through Jesse Winchester's "Payday" and gospel-jazz slouches through Willie Dixon's "Hidden Charms" and Mose Allison's "Everybody's Crying Mercy".

But the slower and more feminine the album becomes, the better it gets. The Supremes' "Remove This Doubt" is a gorgeous deep soul weepie, with Knechtel's romantic piano triplets and Costello's own falsetto harmonies keeping the girl-group drama high, despite the lyrics' change of gender. The same androgynous ballad tricks buoy Burt Bacharach's "Please Stay", Aretha's "Running Out Of Fools" and Randy Newman's "I've Been Wrong Before", previously recorded by both Dusty Springfield and Cilla Black.

And although Bill Anderson's "Must You Throw Dirt In My Face" and "The Very Thought Of You" are both male compositions, Costello sings and arranges them with big nods towards the torchy female soul ballads of the '60s, to delicious, sighing effect.

Kojak Variety's two finest moments, however, are exceptions to the in-touch-with-your-feminine-side rule. Costello's confident take on Bob Dylan's "I Threw It All Away" from *Nashville Skyline* sees him sing it like Lennon over a perfect meld of R'n'B feel and *Pat Garrett*...-era Dylan arrangement. It's a top-class Costello cover, but still not as thrilling as his spooky, freaked-out take on The Kinks' "Days", in which Costello rediscovers that thick, queasy, nasal voice that made his early records so savage and true (it also sounds oddly like 2014-era Damon Albarn). "Days", with its dislocated dub-psych deconstruction of Ray Davies' elegant nostalgia, is right up there among Costello's finest moments.

On the liner notes for the 2004 reissue, Costello reiterates his regret that *Kojak Variety* hadn't been allowed to "simply appear in the racks" sometime in 1991, remarking that the album would have "had more charm if issued in this fashion". But *Kojak Variety*'s best moments are sublime, and the whole project echoes a key couplet from its second song: "*When I hold you in my arms/It brings out all of your hidden charms.*"

TRACKMARKS KOJAK VARIETY

1. Strange ★★
2. Hidden Charms ★★
3. Remove This Doubt ★★★★
4. I Threw It All Away ★★★★
5. Leave My Kitten Alone ★★
6. Everybody's Crying Mercy ★★
7. I've Been Wrong Before ★★★
8. Bama Lama Bama Loo ★★
9. Must You Throw Dirt In My Face ★★★
10. Pouring Water On A Drowning Man ★★★
11. The Very Thought Of You ★★★
12. Payday ★★
13. Please Stay ★★★
14. Running Out Of Fools ★★★
15. Days ★★★★★

Label: Warner Bros
Produced by: Elvis Costello and Kevin Killen
Recorded at: Blue Wave Studios, Barbados; Eden Studios, London (backing vocals, mixes)
Personnel: Elvis Costello (lead vocals, guitar, harmonica), James Burton (guitars), Marc Ribot (guitars, eb horn), Jim Keltner (drums), Pete Thomas (drums), Jerry Scheff (bass), Larry Knechtel (piano, organ)
Highest chart position: UK 21; US 102

ARCHIVE ♦ 1995 ♦

"Arty-farty? That phrase should be forcibly removed from the dictionary."

1995, and the ever-changing polymath reveals his most unlikely incarnation yet – as an amiable football pundit on TV! TERRY STAUNTON tries to keep up with the myriad interests of a rock renaissance man, involving Bob Dylan, Prince Charles, Paul McCartney and Alan Hansen, and a notably passionate defence of Rodgers & Hammerstein...

TAKEN FROM NME 20/5/1995

HALF-TIME IN THE Serie A derby match between Genoa and Sampdoria, and still no score. Channel 4 has got sod all action to replay during the interval, so it's over to this week's guest pundit for some expert analysis.

So who have we got this week? Big Ron Atkinson? Ray 'Butch' 'Tango' Wilkins? The perpetually sidelined Gazza? Lordy no! Nothing so mundane from C4. Forget your fading footballers or your out-of-work managers with sunbed tans. This week, someone introduced as "the thinking man's Gary Barlow" will dissect every disputed decision, half-realised play and goalmouth scramble. Step forward footie fan supreme Elvis Costello. Yes, that Elvis Costello.

Elvis, as the great Mojo Nixon once remarked, is everywhere. His new old album of covers *Kojak Variety* is in the shops this week; he's just finished a stint opening for Bob Dylan in London, Paris and Dublin; he's the "musical director" of a somewhat highbrow festival on London's South Bank next month; he was the first guest on Radio 3's new classical equivalent of *Desert Island Discs*; he recently performed before that "sad bog" the Prince Of Wales; and, beyond his valued contribution for C4's *Football Italia*, he's also been managing a team for BBC2's *Fantasy Football League*, finishing the season with mid-table respectability.

If 1994 was a busy year for Costello – constant touring with the reconvened Attractions, promoting the *Brutal Youth* album – then 1995 is turning out to be even more hectic. But what links this year's activities is Elvis the fan. He's been hanging out with his heroes (both musical and sporting), indulging himself like never before and seems to be having fun.

FOR THE BEST part of 15 years Costello appeared to wear the crown of King Grumpy, a moody bastard with a particular dislike of the media. Then, after 1991's *Mighty Like A Rose* (what Elvis himself refers to as 'The Beard Years'), everything changed. The Costello who greets the press at a West London hotel today has a hearty handshake, a wide smile and is liberally offering throat pastilles to all and sundry. He's also talking a mile a minute and you have to be on your guard to reel him back in every now and then, as he's inclined to go off on one.

Elvis is playing the charming host to talk about the new album, *Kojak Variety*, his second collection of cover versions. But where 1981's *Almost Blue* was a no-nonsense country set, this time he's spread the net wider. Perhaps the

DEREK RIDGERS

Elvis Costello, by Derek Ridgers, 1995

best known tunes are The Kinks' "Days" and Bob Dylan's "I Threw It All Away"", but then we have largely undiscovered gems like The Supremes' "Remove This Doubt", The Louvin Brothers' "Must You Throw Dirt In My Face" and Randy Newman's "I've Been Wrong Before" (a modest hit for Cilla back in '65, fact fans).

The album, featuring session greats like guitarist James Burton (also a favourite of the other Elvis) and drummer Jim Keltner (a Lennon regular in the '70s), was recorded over a two-week period in Barbados in 1991, but shelved until a gap in Costello's release schedule for his self-penned material.

"With a major record company it's a bit like circling over Heathrow waiting to land – sometimes it just isn't your turn to get a record out," he explains. "I could have put this out shortly after *Mighty Like A Rose*, but I got involved with *The Juliet Letters* (Costello's pseudo-classical song cycle with The Brodsky Quartet) and that sort of took priority.

"But I had to record *Kojak Variety* when I did. These were some of my favourite musicians and I'd worked with them before on specific tracks, but this was the only chance to do something with them all together. I really wanted a record of my time with them. I never really wanted to make a big thing about this record; I actually had the idea of trying to get it into the racks before anybody knew it existed, just sneak it out with a minimum of fuss. Sadly, the record company didn't exactly go for that."

Elvis is fond of other people's songs. Beyond *Almost Blue* and *Kojak Variety* he's released something like 40 cover versions, including two of his only three Top 10 hits ("Yeah, so much for me being the great songwriter"). But isn't the bulk of the new collection (Screaming Jay Hawkins, James Carr, Willie Dixon, Mose Allison) nothing more than Costello being wilfully obscure?

"No, they're just some of my favourite songs. Everybody's got a favourite song they bet no-one else has heard. Everybody likes to surprise, but there's nothing exasperating about this that I can see. What would be exasperating would be to do a whole record of songs that you can't possible get out of the shadow of. What's the point?"

You wouldn't be talking about the recent Annie Lennox and Duran Duran covers albums by any chance?

"I haven't heard either of them, to be honest."

But you're aware of the stuff they've covered. Are they just slaughtering sacred cows?

"Well, I suppose if you've got a big enough gun you can do that. I heard the Annie Lennox single and loved it. I didn't know the song, didn't know it was a cover version, so I didn't approach it with any preconceptions. A few of the things on *Kojak Variety* have that advantage."

Costello himself has been covered by several of his heroes (George Jones, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, Dusty Springfield, Chet Baker, Roger McGuinn), but has he heard Duran Duran's take on "Watching The Detectives"?

"Well, they sent me a tape of that one track, although I haven't heard the whole record they put out. I've seen the posters around town, y'know, 'Duran Duran Thank You'. They sound so sincere, are they thanking us from the bottom of their hearts?"

Never mind all that, don't change the subject. What do you think of what they've done with your song?

"Um... [*long pause*] it sounds extraordinarily like Duran Duran playing 'Watching The Detectives'... with everything that implies."

That's very diplomatic.

"Well... [*even longer pause*] not long after I'd started out, Linda Ronstadt did 'Alison' and I was pretty rude about it. Pretty ungracious."

With Annie Lennox: "Loved her single..."

"THE ATTRACTIONS HAD A FREE RUN OF AMERICA FOR QUITE A FEW YEARS... WE MADE A PROPER PIG'S EAR OF IT"
ELVIS COSTELLO

You actually described it at the time as "a waste of vinyl", and then she went on to do another three of your songs on her next album.

"Yeah, I didn't exactly discourage her, did I? The thing is, I was snooty about the recordings, but I wasn't so snooty about the money. The money actually allowed me to do a lot of things, I could go my own way. I wasn't under any pressure from my own record company because I was getting money from her covers. The record that 'Alison' was on sold four million copies. That was a lot of money, probably paid my bills longer than any record of my own."

Did you really need the dosh at the time?

"Oh yeah, there's this illusion that because I had a lot of hit singles, that I was a really big earner. But it's the same with a band like Blur, y'know? They don't sell outside of England, do they? Maybe a bit in Europe, but not in America. You're not really a massive pop star if nobody in America knows who you are."

Is America the be-all and end-all?

"I think most groups want to break America... I know The Attractions did. But The Jam were never that keen. Back in the '70s, my manager Jake Riviera approached John Weller (dad and manager of Paul) for us to do a co-headlining tour of the States, but they weren't into it, so it never really happened for them over there. To some extent, The Attractions had a free run of America for quite a few years. We made a proper pig's ear of it, but that's another story..."

REX FEATURES/ILPO MUSTO

Fantasy Football League: Elvis spreads his net with new attractions David Baddiel, Alan Hansen and Frank Skinner

COSTELLO'S WORKLOAD RARELY lets up these days. As soon as he's finished promoting *Kojak Variety*, he'll record his next album of originals with The Attractions, having given some of the songs an acoustic dry run when opening for Bob Dylan earlier in the year.

"We share an agent in the States and she'd had word from Bob about me maybe doing something with him in Europe, joining him onstage for the encores. But it also gave me a chance to try out the new songs and learn to sing them well, get acquainted with them in front of an audience. The thing about Dylan's audience is that they really listen; I had a naturally disposed curious audience who were used to listening to words, either in new songs or, to use a horrible modern word, 'deconstructed' versions of familiar material."

So basically you used 4,000 Dylan fans a night as guinea pigs?

"Well, they didn't seem to have any objections, they got it as a free bonus. Probably more than once, because he gets the same people coming to his shows night after night.

"That's not something I usually understand, people who go to multiple nights of the same artist, although it does sort of make sense with Dylan. There's something different every night. I try to do that myself, but he takes it even further.

"Him and Neil Young are people I'm very encouraged by, they still make a huge effort. You know what it is? They haven't settled for a safe version of themselves the way a lot of artists have. There are people who get to a certain stage in their careers, put on the grey suits, get some endorsements and go out with a carefully tailored version of what they used to do really well. There's no chance of failure, there's no chance of success, it's just sad."

You're a bit keen, then?

"Yeah, I watched the Dylan shows from every different perspective; in Paris I watched from the side of the stage, I watched all three Brixton shows from a seat in the balcony, and I wandered all over the place in Dublin. It was fascinating to see what was going on. You can learn a lot from watching a guy like that. I really like the band he's got, they manage to rein the song back in just when it starts to go out too far, but they know to go with whatever happens. There were heart-stopping moments every night."

Have you always been a big fan?

"Not right at the very beginning. I'm not old enough to have been a teenager that would have bought the albums faithfully as they came out, I always regarded him as being just a pop singer who had hit singles. He was just part of the '60s to me, but as I got older I started to get the idea that this was the sort of stuff I should have been listening to more intently. In about 1970 I went out and bought – I think – *Blonde On Blonde* and then I slowly collected four or five others. I was a bit late, I suppose."

ELVIS HAS BEEN known to express his fandom by, ahem, "borrowing" lines and melodies from other people's songs and sticking them in his own. The keenest ears will detect Dusty Springfield in "Accidents Will Happen", The Beatles in "Possession", Aretha Franklin in "I Want You", The Supremes in "High Fidelity". The list goes on and on, and it's something our beloved entertainer is proud of.

"That's good, I think. It's a noble musical tradition that goes right back to classical music. Classical musicians often did variations on other people's themes; all the baroque composers did it like crazy.

"Then if you go forward into popular music, a lot of European composers brought their influences to America with them. Don't you think that when you listen back to old American songs you can hear bits of Europe in them, they're not wholly American? Kurt Weill is an obvious example, but here's a thing; George Gershwin was a Russian. Can you think of anybody more American than Gershwin? Yet, he's a full-blooded Russian. What music did he listen to as a kid? Jewish-Russian. All European."

On a classical note, Costello is in charge of this year's Meltdown festival on London's South Bank, an annual season of concerts bringing together "serious" music from all walks of life. Over eight days in June, apart from a solo show by Elvis himself, there will be The Jazz Passengers featuring Deborah Harry, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, avant-garde composer Bill Frisell, indigenous Pakistani spiritual music, and several other projects that could comfortably be described as "worthy".

Meltdown's a bit of a shit title, isn't it? It sounds like a Channel 4 youth show.

"Yeah, I'm not too keen. It has that sort of 'Hey! Aren't we dangerous!' ring to it. Terrible. It also sounds like some dreadful thing off an American diner menu, y'know, something with plastic cheese on it. But the festival was established two years ago and it's only mine to play with for one week, so I can't really ask them to change it.

"It's one way of selling classical music. In previous years they've had more what you'd call contemporary composers, people working on the new edge of modern composition. It gives them a valid excuse to look at various schools of composition over the years, like there's also something marking the tercentenary of Henry Purcell's death going on. There's no real linking theme to Meltdown, though."

By having your name on everything, it's designed to attract an entirely new audience, wouldn't you say?

"Well, inevitably this is the trade-off, yeah. There's perhaps a lack of what you might call intellectual rigour but in return they get to use my name, which is perhaps better known than some of the composers who've done it previously, at least better known to a general public.

"I'm genuinely enthusiastic about a lot of this music. I've got a little tired over the last few years with the predictability of certain types of concerts; I always knew what was going to happen, a bit like knowing the end of the thriller. But when it's the kind of music you don't know so much about, it helps you open your ears. I was lucky to find some voices, composers, performers – including The Brodsky Quartet – that helped me get past a lot of the natural inhibition that everybody has to the unexpected or unfamiliar."

Isn't there a danger that people will see this as being a tad too arty-farty, and you're just showing off your musical intellect?

Elvis puts down his mineral water and gives me a cold stare. Eek!

"Yeah, I can imagine some sections of the media sneering at it; there's whole corners of the media that thrive on doing that all day long. That's all they can do. Do these people really like the taste of bile in their mouths?"

Elvis Costello; music lover, media hater.

"I read a thing in *Time Out*, which is a comical publication (*surely a highly respected London listings publication? – Ed*), a review of a Rodgers & Hammerstein musical which they described as 'odious'. Now, there are many things that are odious in this world; Jonathan Aitken, the

JOHN CHEVES

old regime in Haiti, the Holocaust, but I don't think you can put a Rodgers & Hammerstein musical in the same bracket, no matter how bad it might be.

"But that's the way some of the media talk, it's like a sneering form of Tourette's Syndrome. And as for 'arty-farty', that's a phrase that should be forcibly removed from the dictionary with a pair of scissors. They can sneer as much as they want, but I don't think Meltdown is a chance for me to show off. Everything is being presented on a one-time basis, but to be perfectly truthful, we don't know how anything is going to turn out. What is there to show off about?"

Meltdown will be Costello's third project with the Brodskys this year, following on from a brief Arts Council-supported tour of Spain and a very special performance organised by his old mate and boyhood hero Paul McCartney. Nice gig, shame about the royalty appears to be the verdict...

"Yeah, we did this wild thing at St James's Palace that Paul had been asked to put together to raise money for the Royal College Of Music. It was a dinner dance in this picture gallery; these sort of things go on all the time but you never hear about them unless you read the court pages.

"You know how it is, they get someone famous like Paul, who's probably the most famous British composer of this century, to sort out a musical evening and a load of rich people come along and get fleeced. That's the way charity works. The Brodskys and I did an arrangement of Brian Wilson's "God Only Knows", which is really something, and a new Clive Langer arrangement of "Shipbuilding" – people always forget Clive wrote the music for that. I always get the credit, which is totally unfair.

"Paul and me got up and did an old Beatles tune, 'One After 909', and then Paul did this amazing set with the Brodskys; "For No One", "Lady Madonna", "Yesterday" and "Eleanor Rigby". It was fucking unbelievable. You can think what you like about McCartney, but when we're all dead and gone, those songs are still gonna be around.

"It's a pity that more people couldn't have seen it, but it was pretty exclusive; Prince Charles was there."

Did you meet the Prince?

"No, I made my excuses. He seemed like a bit of a sad bog, really. He must be aware of the fact by now that it's not like the old days any more. It's not like the old Pathe newsreel where Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret are off on holiday and there'd be fucking 50,000 people on the streets of Southampton to see two little girls get on a ship. He must know that every room he goes in now there's at least 50 per cent of the people thinking, 'What a prat'."

You're not a fan, then?

"There's people who want to meet him and it's a big deal to them, it ain't a big deal to me. I was there at Paul's invitation, not his. I mean, if you want to get political about it, his family could have done one important thing in the last 25 years. Never mind whether the IRA lay down their guns, any time there was a Loyalist outrage in the last 25 years, the Windsors could have said, 'This is not an expression of Loyalism.' That was the one good thing they could have done and never did, so I don't want to shake the Prince's hand."

THERE ARE HANDSHAKES aplenty at *Fantasy Football League* a few hours after our interview, when Costello is introduced to his fellow guest, Liverpool and Scotland's Alan Hansen, now the acerbic voice of Premiership punditry on the BBC. Elvis is pleased to be in the company of one of his biggest heroes, and his passion for Liverpool FC is legendary. He's been known to delay gigs if there's live commentary on the radio, or at least have someone in the wings shouting out the score.

"BOB DYLAN AND NEIL YOUNG ARE PEOPLE I'M VERY ENCOURAGED BY, THEY STILL MAKE A HUGE EFFORT"
ELVIS COSTELLO

"I don't get to go as often as I'd like, I don't live in Liverpool any more, but from the time I was old enough to go to Anfield on my own I took every available opportunity to be there. The last time I went was the 3-3 draw with Manchester United last season. Brilliant game, United were three up after 26 minutes and we pulled it back. It was the first time my wife had been to Anfield, what a match to see! Incredible!

"Hansen was in the team when I went regularly. He's great, he's a funny guy. He's the only one on TV who talks any sense about football. Everybody knows he could do a better job than most managers, he's got the brain for it."

Wasn't he in the running when Graeme Souness got the chop last year?

"Yeah, but would he want it? He plays golf, he does his punditry, he writes the odd column for *Radio Times* – would you trade all that for the life of a football manager? I met Kenny Dalglish once, a really nice man, but he was in a real state when he left Liverpool; he practically ran out of Anfield, he couldn't wait to leave. He's an intelligent guy, one of the best players who ever walked on the field, and if he couldn't stand the pressure, why the fuck would anyone else want it?"

Traditionally, there's always been more pressure at Anfield.

"Definitely, there's the fans' expectations. I mean, all this stuff about Man United, I don't know what all the fuss is about. What have they won so far? Not really that much. They had 25 years of nothing and then they get a couple of trophies. It's a couple of shelves, no big deal."

The rest of the year will see Costello collaborating with one of his biggest heroes of all time, Burt Bacharach, on a film score before beavering away in the studio with The Attractions. And it's his reconciliation with his old band that many people see as the turning point in Costello's fortunes.

With Bruce Thomas, Pete Thomas and Steve Nieve back on board after an absence of seven years, 1994's *Brutal Youth* was a magnificent return to form. Costello's songs had a potency and fire that had been lacking from its predecessors *Mighty Like A Rose* and *Spike*. Elvis turned 40 while touring with The Attractions last summer, but anyone who saw the shows would have been stunned by the attack and thrust of four men who had first been described as one of the most exciting live bands in Britain as far back as 1977.

There's a spring in his step and a sting in his songs again; Declan Patrick MacManus is enjoying being Elvis Costello once more. Elvis is everywhere and he's smiling. Yup, very big deal indeed.

TIM KENT

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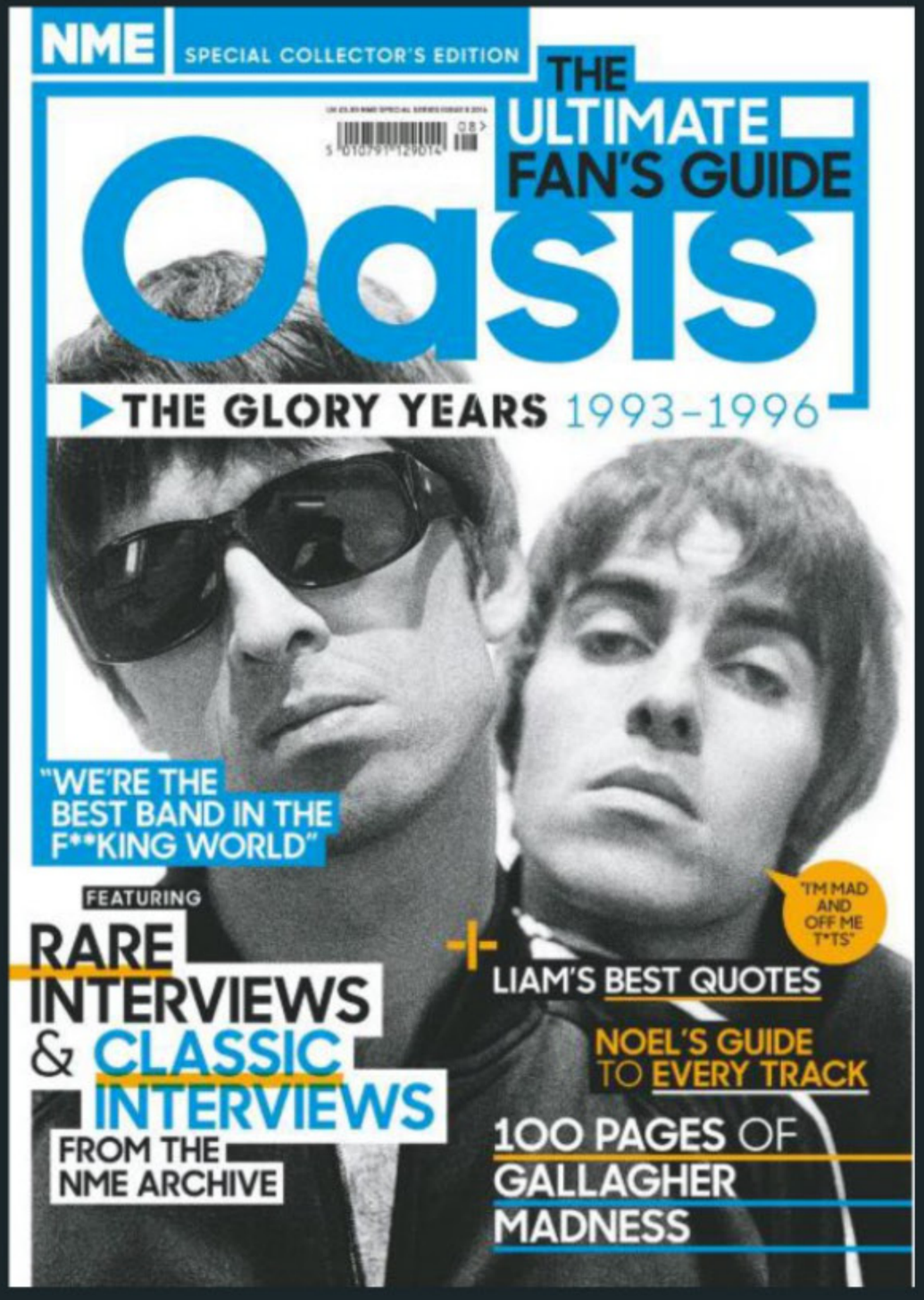

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ALL THIS USELESS BEAUTY

Dreams sour and midlife crises proliferate at The Attractions' muted last stand.

BY JIM WIRTH

RELEASED MAY 14, 1996

NOT AS BAD as some would make out, the final Elvis Costello & The Attractions album is nonetheless the sound of a band going down without much of a fight. Originally conceived as a double album, the final new recording under Costello's Warner Brothers' contract eventually trundled out as a makeweight assortment, featuring several songs originally written for and recorded by other artists. Gravity is taking its toll on the fortysomething band. Rome is burning and no-one even bothers to fiddle that much.

"*I took my better nature out, drowned it in the babbling stream*," sings Costello, documenting his midlife crisis sourly on the quietly cosmic "Little Atoms". "*Took the blossom of my youth and blew it all to smithereens*."

That youth's final blooming was arguably 1994's Attractions reunion record, *Brutal Youth* – which has a strong case for being the strongest record of his career. With that last burst of skinny-tie bravado out of his system, *All This Useless Beauty* scrambles for a new purpose somewhat ineffectually, crushed by the burden of Costello's obvious disappointment at what his career – maybe even his life – had brought him thus far. "It seems to have been a time that was incredibly serious and rather wretched," he recalled in his sleevenote to the expanded reissue, adding equally sourly: "I was also drinking very large quantities of alcohol. That'll work for you every time if you really want to remain miserable."

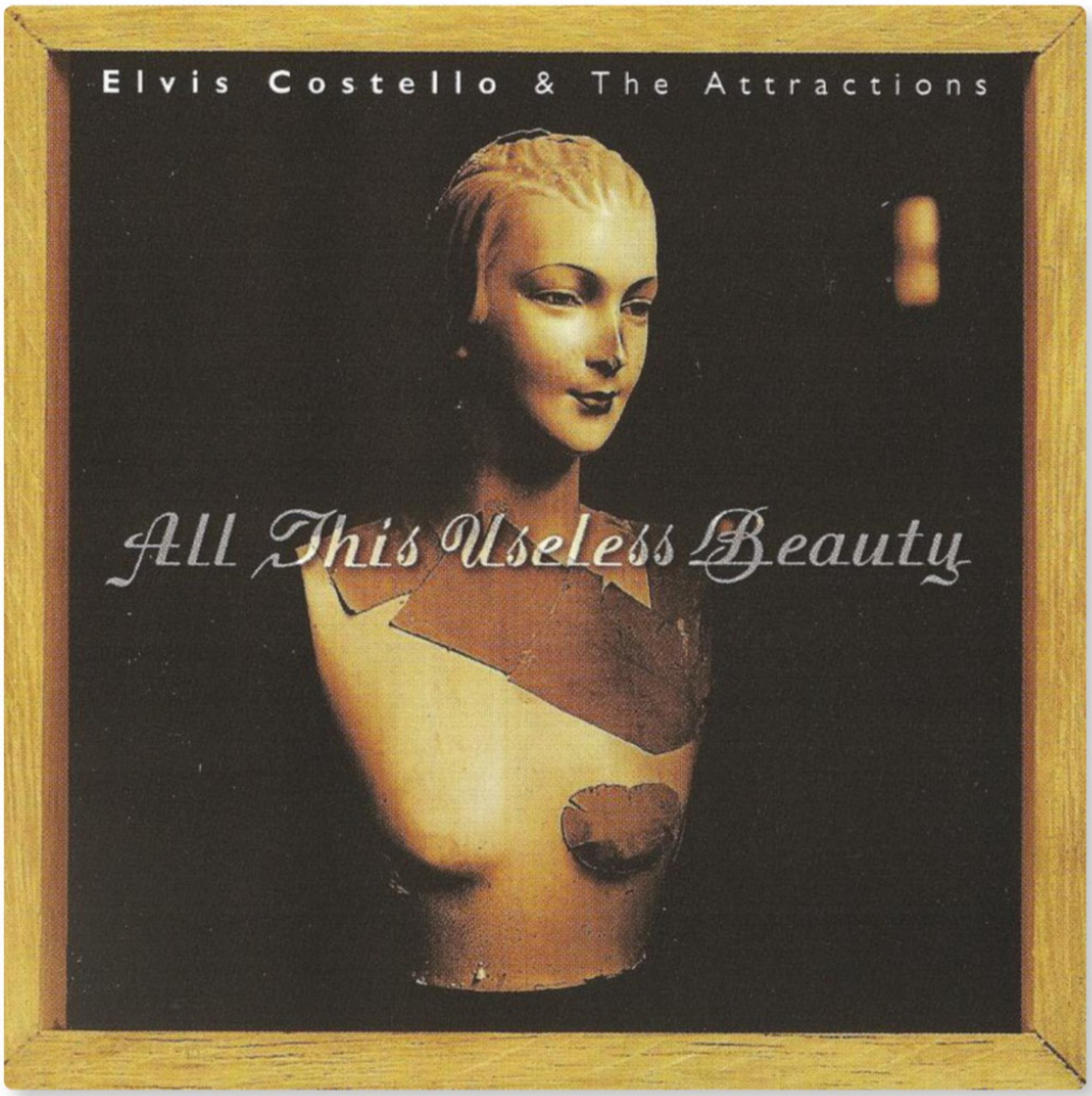
Gloomy and inward-looking, it is a record about slipping into middle age with a combination of curmudgeonly stubbornness and cowardice. "*Nonsense prevails, modesty fails, grace and virtue turn into stupidity*," Costello sings on the title track, one of two unusually generous gifts he bestowed on Lorelei-voiced folkie June Tabor in the early 1990s, only to reclaim here.

"There were songs about betraying your principles, letting yourself down and being diminished," Costello recalled of the final tracklisting. "None of these lyrics contained any anger toward the characters, only disappointment that they had settled for so little. I could just as easily have been talking to myself."

"You Bowed Down" – written for ex-Byrd Roger McGuinn's 1991 solo album *Back From Rio* – is a case in point in that sense; a jingle-jangle mourning for cheaply sold ideals, Costello purring scornfully: "*It must have hurt you to see how dreams sour*."

The ridiculousness of second childhood masculinity is the central theme of "Poor Fractured Atlas" – which Costello regards as perhaps the finest Attractions recording – beginning with a guffawing rejoinder to Iron John wannabes. "*He's out in the woods with his squirrel gun/To try to recapture his anger*." However, it swiftly morphs into something a little more personal. "*He's screaming some words at the top of his lungs/Until he begins to feel younger*."

If that is another unflattering self-portrait, it is no great shock that Costello might have thought that another noisy Attractions album like *Brutal Youth* was somehow beneath his dignity, and certainly the music on *All This Useless Beauty* – and indeed much of what has followed since – represents a quest for something more refined than the four-square sound that made him. Rock'n'roll is all but excised from "Starting To Come To Me" and the Cole Porter-ish closer "I Want To Vanish": further evidence of a quest for a music tailored more to the expanding waistlines and receding hairlines of dignified middle age.



THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"He has a lot to be confident about here. He has divided his songwriting between a teardrop melancholy and a ramshackle vivacity, both extremes being well fed with occasional wit." DANIEL BOOTH, MELODY MAKER, MAY 18, 1996

"*All This Useless Beauty* is a kind of stylists' catalogue, in which Elvis plays Whose Tune Is It Anyway?, impersonating himself, as if he were writing with Paul McCartney in the style of Tom Waits... The results are often fascinating." ROGER MORTON, NME, MAY 11, 1996

Tellingly, the next 'proper' album Costello recorded after *All This Useless Beauty* was a collaboration with Burt Bacharach.

There is some more vigorous material – Paul McCartney collaboration "Shallow Grave", and "Complicated Shadows", written for Johnny Cash – but the general tone is subdued and stately, meaning that the rough-and-ready Attractions have remarkably little to get their teeth into. Drummer Pete Thomas and pianist Steve Nieve continue to back Costello as The Imposters, but bassist Bruce Thomas would never work with his old flatmate again after this record, blaming Costello's increasingly controlling manner – and the singer's relationship with then-wife Cait O'Riordan – for their artistic divorce. "Pete, Steve and EC are working happily together with a replacement bass player – presumably someone of a more malleable nature than his predecessor," Thomas said later.

Deciding to no longer keep his enemies close has not always been beneficial, and "It's Time", the penultimate track on *All This Useless Beauty*, suggests that Costello knows he can be lost without some tension. "*If you do have to leave me*," he wails desperately, "*Who will I have left to hate?*"

Such red-eyed rage is out of place among the autumnal tones of *All This Useless Beauty*; atrophic browns, equivocal greys. The fact that the best song – and opening track – on the album is probably the oldest of the lot is further evidence of this being a down period, emotionally and creatively, for Costello.

"The Other End Of The Telescope" was released on US college-rockers' 'Til Tuesday's 1988 album *Everything's Different Now*, having been written in collaboration with the band's singer, Aimee Mann. However, Costello returns to it with renewed vigour nine years on, piling on the bitterness into the original wistful folk-rock meander around a love affair rapidly running its course.

With the Scrooge-ish protagonist ruefully cradling "*the cast-iron heart*" that his lover "*failed to tear open*", it is one of the most nuanced deliveries of Costello's career, seemingly full of insight gained more by looking in a mirror than staring into an eyepiece. "*You're half-naked ambition and you're half out of your wits*," he notes at one point, adding in an unusual piece of self-soothing: "*Your head is so sore from all of that thinking — I don't want to hurt you now, but I think you're shrinking.*"

The choice of title was a fair indication that Costello knew *All This Useless Beauty* was destined to be a footnote. A fist vainly waved at a departing bus.

TRACKMARKS ALL THIS USELESS BEAUTY

1. The Other End Of The Telescope ★★★★★
2. Little Atoms ★★★★
3. All This Useless Beauty ★★★★
4. Complicated Shadows ★★★
5. Why Can't A Man Stand Alone? ★★
6. Distorted Angel ★★★
7. Shallow Grave ★★★
8. Poor Fractured Atlas ★★★
9. Starting To Come To Me ★★★★
10. You Bowed Down ★★★★
11. It's Time ★★★
12. I Want To Vanish ★★★★

Label: Warner Brothers
Produced by: Geoff Emerick and Elvis Costello
Recorded at: Windmill Studios, Dublin; Westside Studio, London
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitars, bass, piano, other instruments), Steve Nieve (piano, keyboards, drum programming on "It's Time"), Bruce Thomas (bass), Pete Thomas (drums, percussion, acoustic guitar on "You Bowed Down")
Highest chart position: UK 28; US 53

PAINTED FROM MEMORY

Such unlikely lovers... EC measures his songwriting chops up against an all-time master, Burt Bacharach. BY ROB HUGHES

RELEASED SEPTEMBER 29, 1998

THEY SAY YOU should never meet your heroes, much less work with them. Not that Elvis Costello was having any truck with that. Especially when given the opportunity to record with Burt Bacharach on the soundtrack of Allison Anders' 1996 drama *Grace Of My Heart*.

The film didn't do great, but Costello and his new buddy did. The pair's co-written "God Give Me Strength", played out over the closing credits with a full orchestra, was perhaps the best thing about it. An epic ballad with an impassioned vocal and Bacharach's sure handiwork – discreet piano, soft horns and rousing string choir – it was an ideal excuse for Costello to suggest a full-length collaboration.

Costello had long been a fan. Growing up in the '60s, he'd watched his bandleader father Ross cover Bacharach songs in his setlist. He and The Attractions were playing "I Just Don't Know What To Do With Myself" at the height of punk in '77 (a version cropped up on *Live Stiffs* the following year). And by the mid-'80s Costello was slipping bits of "I Say A Little Prayer" and "Twenty-Four Hours From Tulsa" into live medleys.

Timing was key. With The Attractions no longer a going concern, Costello had spent most of 1997 happily flitting from one guest-spot gig to another: The Brodsky Quartet in Europe, The Mingus Big Band in São Paulo, Ricky Skaggs in Nashville, The Fairfield Four in New York. Though it was to Bacharach, having appeared together on *Late Night With David Letterman* in February, that he kept returning. The result was a series of fruitful writing sessions across the year, before the duo were finally ready to record in the summer of '98.

Painted From Memory operated along pretty specific roles. Both parties initially worked on the music, before Bacharach (making his first studio album in 21 years) was left to further refine the melodies and fine-tune arrangements. Costello, as with Burt's '60s foil Hal David, brought the lyrics.

Not a great deal had changed in Bacharach's schooled approach over the decades. These were meticulously crafted songs with a luxuriant touch, their heated drama ramped higher by the use of a 24-piece string orchestra and swathes of horns and woodwinds. Yet this was no ersatz nostalgia trip into some lost era of sophisticated pop. Costello was careful to insist that, at a time when lounge music had been rediscovered by a new generation of kitschy clubbers, this wasn't intended to be easy listening.

It was Costello who gave *Painted From Memory* its emotional centre. The themes are almost universally dark, disturbed even. Love and loss may have been a Bacharach-David bedrock, but these songs cut deeper, driven by despair, regret, betrayal and self-admonishment. Even when things take a rare turn for the good, as on "Such Unlikely Lovers", it's counterweighted by a sense of foreboding, as if disaster was merely biding its time.

The album offers a gentle clash of styles: Bacharach the classic structuralist, Costello the wordsmith tinkering with form. By the latter's own admission, it wasn't always smooth. He adhered to the exacting standards of Bacharach, 26 years his senior, by constantly pruning his lyrics, cutting away his more verbose instincts and saying only what needed to be said.

In Costello's hands, love appears to be little more than a battleground strewn with debris. Or, more precisely on "The Sweetest Punch", a boxing canvas. "*You dropped the band, I can't understand it/Not after all we've been through/Words start to fly, my glass jaw and I/Will find one to walk right*

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"Bacharach's brightly coloured melodies seem to belong in a perpetual LA summer day, while Costello's most celebrated work is laced with distrust and anxiety. But it's Bacharach's style of smooth piano dramatics and trademark pauses that characterises this record, his contribution which is the guiding light." NEIL THOMSON, NME, OCTOBER 10, 1998

"Every poetic conceit is strenuously worked out in what amounts to an intellectual substitute for going to the emotional garden and cutting it fresh." IAN MACDONALD, UNCUT, NOVEMBER 1998

into," he sings, as the recriminations fly and the orchestra approximates the dinging bell of the next round.

Absolved of musical responsibilities, having left all that to Bacharach and the rhythm core of Steve Nieve, bassist Greg Cohen and drummer Jim Keltner, it becomes apparent that Costello has blossomed into a truly great singer. "I Still Have That Other Girl" is a slow-sad number freighted with anguish, in which he rises to the high notes over some deliciously supple chord changes and sudden gusts of strings. And though he undergoes the odd wobble on "This House Is Empty Now", with its soft echoes of "A House Is Not A Home", the feeling of contrition is tangible.

As with the above, you can easily imagine Dionne Warwick doing "Toledo", with its deft brass intro, cooing girl chorus and old-school fadeout. The jazz-scented "My Thief" is another consummate exercise in restraint, the song's protagonist clinging to the last vestiges of hope as Bacharach's orchestra sweeps in: "*Sometimes I pretend you'll come back again/ And you'll console the heart you stole/Have pity on the man/Who knows that you have gone/And has begun to break down.*"

The sore point of *Painted From Memory*, however, is a somewhat predictable one. At times it suffers under the weight of its own perfectionism, Bacharach's arrangements slick to the point of uniformity. And for all the natural scratchiness of Costello's voice, you can't help but crave a little more grit. A little more urgency.

Its release came with an aggressive marketing push from Mercury that saw Bacharach and Costello undertake a series of high-profile TV appearances, some full orchestra gigs and a remake of "I'll Never Fall In Love Again" for the second Austin Powers movie. Channel 4 aired a documentary on the making of the album, *Because It's A Lonely World*, on Boxing Day 1998, with Bravo later following suit in the US. *Painted From Memory* even won a Grammy for "I Still Have That Other Girl".

Yet none of this seemed to chime with the public on any meaningful scale. Reviews may have been favourable, generally, but the album stalled outside the Top 30 in the UK. In America it just about crept below 80. Maybe *Painted From Memory* was seen as little more than an anachronism, two artists immersing themselves in the kind of artful songcraft that had long since slipped away. More's the pity, because here you'll find some of the most engaging vocal performances of Costello's entire career.

TRACKMARKS PAINTED FROM MEMORY

1. In The Darkest Place ★★★★
2. Toledo ★★★★
3. I Still Have That Other Girl ★★★★★
4. This House Is Empty Now ★★★★
5. Tears At The Birthday Party ★★★
6. Such Unlikely Lovers ★★★
7. My Thief ★★★★
8. The Long Division ★★★
9. Painted From Memory ★★★★
10. The Sweetest Punch ★★★★★
11. What's Her Name Today? ★★★★
12. God Give Me Strength ★★★★

Label: Mercury
Produced by: Burt Bacharach and Elvis Costello
Recorded at: Ocean Way, Los Angeles
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals), Burt Bacharach (piano), Steve Nieve (keyboards, piano), Jim Keltner (drums), Greg Cohen (bass), Dean Parks (guitar), Donna Taylor (vocals), Lisa Taylor (vocals), Sue-Ann Carwell (vocals), plus string orchestra and horn players
Highest chart position: UK 32; US 78

WHEN I WAS CRUEL

Elvis' "first loud album since 19??," his new label claim, archly. The truth, though, is satisfyingly weirder. BY JASON ANDERSON

RELEASED APRIL 15, 2002

CAN THERE BE such a thing as rocking out by accident? Even if there isn't, Elvis Costello might well have been surprised by the way *When I Was Cruel* turned out. Had Costello stuck to his original ambitions, it might have been a very different and far more solitary kind of beast. Instead, his first LP of the 21st Century is remarkable for its knockabout vitality and spirit of invention, qualities that are as apparent as the middle-aged rancour that fills such songs as "45", a suitably stroppy opener written in 1999 to mark its author's 45th year.

Evidently overlooking more unexpected elements like the trip-hoppy menace that suffuses "Spooky Girlfriend" and "When I Was Cruel (No 2)", the snarky marketing team at Island, Costello's new label in the US, promised the man's "first loud album since 19??". But it's hard to trust the suggestion that *When I Was Cruel* qualifies as the sort of return-to-rock gesture so beloved of artists who've realised what their deviations from more successful formulas may have cost them.

Even the prominence of Steve Nieve and Pete Thomas – now inducted alongside former Cracker bassist Davey Faragher as members of the newly christened Imposters – proves to be a bit of a red herring. After all, they weren't supposed to be there. As Costello joked in an interview with *Mix* magazine, "I didn't really intend for there to be any other musicians on this record – I thought I'll only call anybody else when I run out of fingers myself." Indeed, by the time the band was hastily convened to play Meltdown in London and an opening slot for Bob Dylan in Kilkenny in the summer of 2001, Costello had already bashed out rough drafts of most of the songs that would appear on *...Cruel*.

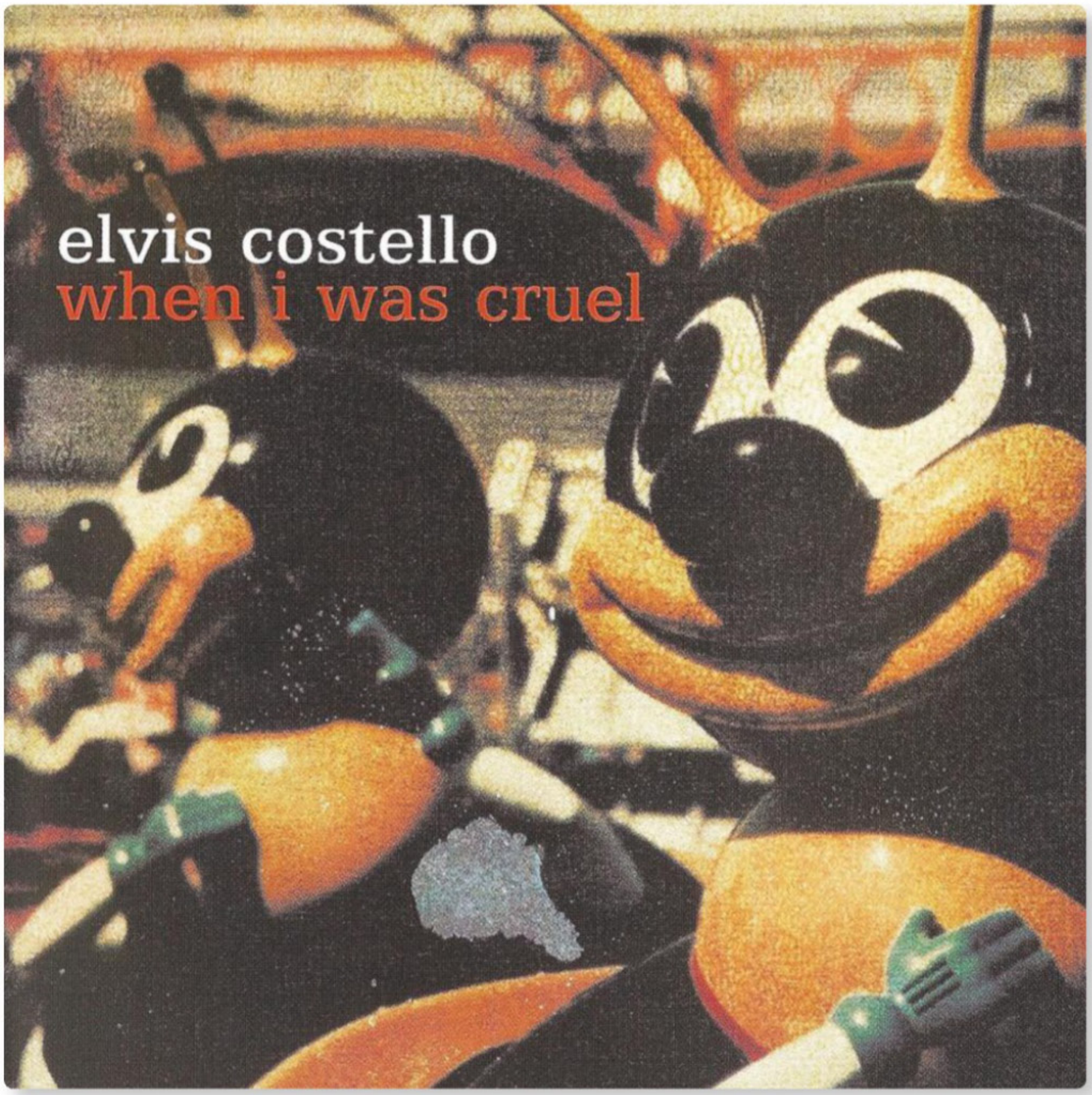
Driven by the prospect of making "something like a rock'n'roll record" except without the familiar methodology, he'd been messing around with simple drum machines with big orange buttons and "a really cheap little sampler" in order to create the desired sense of propulsion. In essence, it was not the sonic aesthetic of vintage Attractions that he sought, but the muscular soundscapes of R&B and hip-hop producers such as Timbaland and El-P.

With his newly minted band in tow, Costello ditched the solo strategy and set to work in Dublin's Windmill Lane. (The horn sections on "15 Petals", "...Dust" and "Episode Of Blonde" were recorded later at Avatar in NYC.) Production duties were split among Costello, engineer Ciarán Cahill, assistant engineer and editor Kieran Lynch and engineer/programmer Leo Pearson, under collective handle The Imposter.

Clearly the man thinks there's something fraudulent about the whole endeavour, but few would share his suspicion. Often exhilarating and sometimes staggeringly good, the results were welcomed as a return to (old) form by many fans who felt beleaguered by his genre-hopping habits. It mattered not a jot that "15 Petals" and "Dissolve" were far too clanky and clangorous to ever pass for outtakes from *This Year's Model*. Costello achieved a muckier aesthetic, favouring the sound of a 15-watt Sears Roebuck amplifier that he'd found in New Jersey.

What mattered to the faithful was that, for most of *When I Was Cruel*'s 63 minutes, Costello struck the same balance of fury, pithiness and melodic verve that was the stock-in-trade of his younger self. Nowhere was this more evident than in "Tear Off Your Own Head (It's a Doll Revolution)", a burly rocker that's enlivened by Nieve's brilliantly askew contributions on his Hohner pianet and Vox Continental, and snarky lyrics inspired by a creepy set of Japanese dolls.

It's matched in impact by "45", a stridently delivered parable about the perils of using *"a stack of shellac and vinyl"* to measure life



THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"Too much on *When I Was Cruel* is pointedly obtuse in an overfamiliar EC way: lazily ill-considered, flash savagery for the sake of a good pun. With a bit of self-pruning, a bit more risk and space in the production, he might have truly self-reinvented."

IAN PENMAN, UNCUT, MAY 2002

stages. With its echoes of "Radio, Radio", the song is irresistible to anyone who ever used Costello's own hits as containers of memories and emotions. "Dissolve" is nearly as punchy thanks to the old-school propulsion that Thomas provides and the metallic racket created by Costello's blasts of harmonica and Hofner fuzz bass. Driven by a snarling guitar riff, "Daddy Can I Turn This?" could almost pass for a Mudhoney-worthy exercise in assault and battery, if not for a mellifluous middle eight.

The latter is also a strong example of *When I Was Cruel*'s modus operandi, which is combining the time-tested tropes of Classic Costello with the more unconventional tactics he's favoured in his beard-friendly years. The most frenzied of the three tracks with horns recorded in New York, "15 Petals" is the most rhythmically adventurous song, with its Afrofunk-style aggression and Moroccan-flavoured arrangement. Yet Costello grounds it in more familiar terrain, with a vocal performance that oscillates from a steely croon to angry bellowing. "Episode Of Blonde" serves as a further demonstration of his dexterity by somehow synthesizing a tango rhythm, a Meters-style funk strut, noisy guitar squalls and an irresistible Dylan-in-anthemic-mode chorus.

With its Portishead-like air of languor and unease, the seven-minute-long "When I Was Cruel No 2" may best reflect Costello's initial intentions and therefore most strongly defy the LP's return-to-rock billing. A more conventional mid-tempo effort that shares little with its namesake besides the title phrase, "...No 1" appears on the expanded UK edition and the US companion album *Cruel Smile*. Built around a sample of a '60s hit by Italian pop icon Mina, it draws a ruthless portrait of a wedding in which the worldweary groom has had too many marriages already. Tellingly, the author was himself between ceremonies, his separation from second wife Cait O'Riordan becoming final the same year as the album's release.

One of the many poisoned ballads in which love exists largely as a lie we tell ourselves to spare us the terror of being alone, "When I Was Cruel No 2" is as ugly as *Blood & Chocolate*'s "I Want You". At the same time, the spite is softened by a musical setting that's sly and sinuous. However much the raging of Imposters defines *When I Was Cruel*, Costello still understands that a simmering anger can serve him just as well as the kind that explodes.

TRACKMARKS WHEN I WAS CRUEL

1. 45 ★★★★
2. Spooky Girlfriend ★★★
3. Tear Off Your Own Head (It's a Doll Revolution) ★★★★
4. When I Was Cruel No 2 ★★★★
5. Soul for Hire ★★★
6. 15 Petals ★★★★
7. Tart ★★★
8. Dust 2...★★★
9. Dissolve ★★★
10. Alibi ★★★★
11. ...Dust ★★★
12. Daddy Can I Turn This? ★★★★
13. My Little Blue Window ★★★
14. Episode Of Blonde ★★★★
15. Radio Silence ★★★
16. Oh Well (UK and Japan bonus track) ★★

Label: Mercury
Produced by: The Imposter (Elvis Costello, Ciarán Cahill, Leo Pearson, Kieran Lynch)
Recorded at: Windmill Lane Recording, Dublin; Avatar Studios Inc, New York City
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitars, melodica, cymbal, bass, piano, harmonica, horn arrangements), Steve Nieve (organ, pianet, piano, vibraphone, melodica, filters), Davey Faragher (bass), Pete Thomas (drums, percussion), Steven Kennedy (backing vocals), Leo Pearson (electric tabla, rhythm processor, tambourine, mixing), Bill Ware (vibraphone), Ku-umba Frank Lacy (trumpet, flugelhorn), Curtis Fowlkes (trombone), Jay Rodriguez (tenor sax), Roy Nathanson (alto sax)
Highest chart position: UK 17; US 20

NORTH

"*A change has come over me I'm powerless to express.*" Disarmingly honest, uncharacteristically happy – this guy's in love! BY NICK HASTED

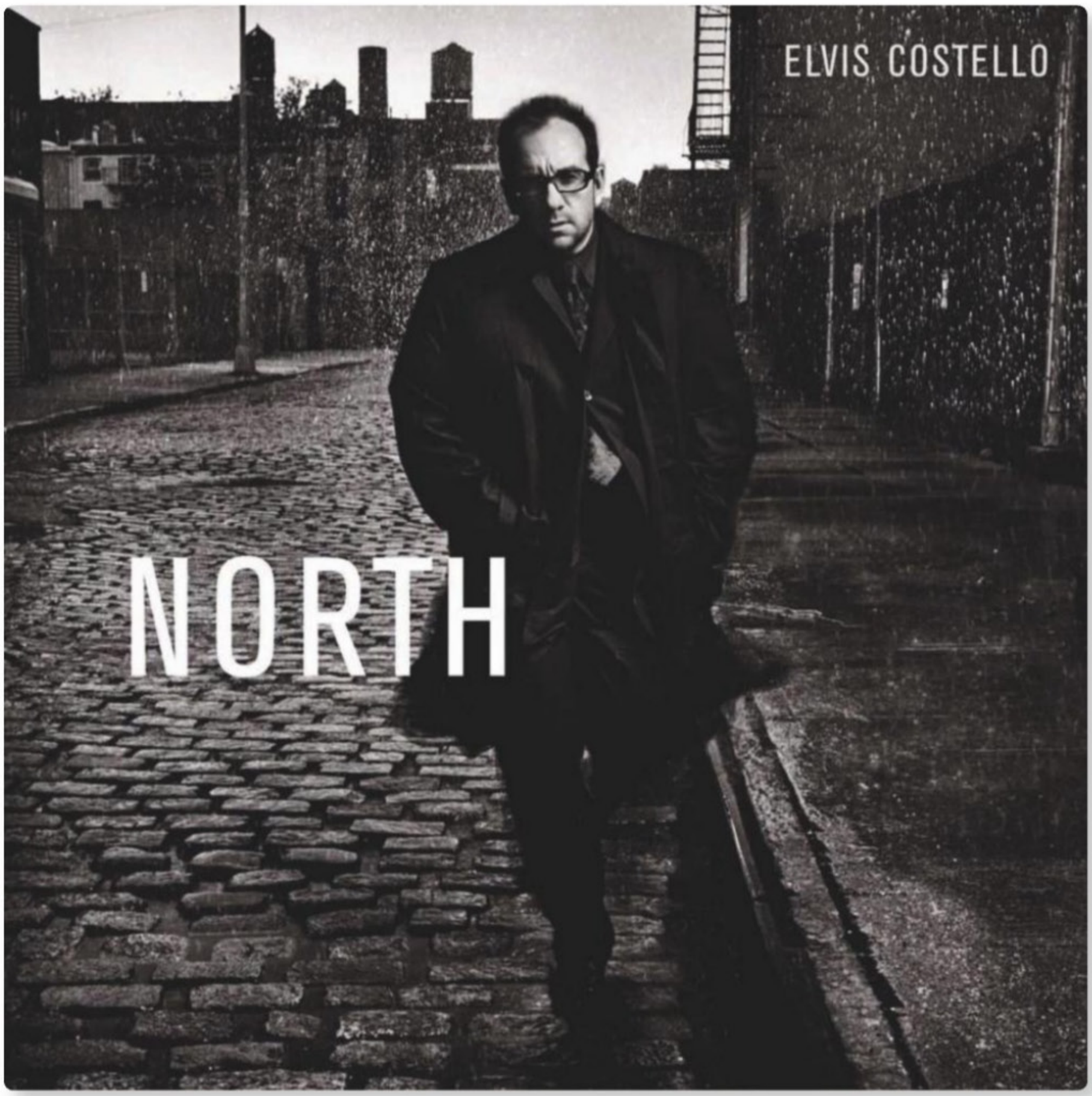
RELEASED SEPTEMBER 23, 2003

NORTH IS COSTELLO'S least typical set of songs. It finds the Mouth Almighty tongue-tied, and the launcher of a hundred acid-tipped romantic barbs humbled by love. Laying his strengths to one side, he left himself uncharacteristically defenceless with a muted, soft-hearted, vulnerable album of unmistakeably autobiographical songs, tracing the collapse of his marriage to Cait O'Riordan and infatuation with his future wife, the Canadian jazz singer Diana Krall. Costello predictably bristled at the wounding reviews that resulted. These weren't unfair, inasmuch as a musician who only made records like *North* would be a minor one. But in the context of Costello's career, it has the feeling of opening the windows on a cool, bright day and gratefully breathing in, before returning to work in the emotional and verbal hothouse of the MacManus song factory. It's a disarmingly honest pause for thought.

The periodically volatile relationship with O'Riordan (Costello's "spiritual", not legal, wife, his biographer Graeme Thomson revealed) had flared into public rows during the extensive *When I Was Cruel* world tour. They had separated in September 2002, announcing an "amicable" end to their "marriage" in November. He had met Krall when they co-presented a Grammy award that February, and they had quickly fallen hard for each other. In April 2003, he recorded the songs that this inspired with equal speed, playing what were basically piano ballads with an acoustic quartet including Steve Nieve. A sparingly used 48-piece orchestra was conducted by Costello from his own score, and The Brodsky Quartet and the great jazz saxophonist Lee Konitz also guested.

Costello's previous marriage break-up had resulted in a sonically clogged, cryptic, drink-sodden shambles, *Goodbye Cruel World*. *North* mostly drew on one clear strand of his music – the one that had introduced a generation of punks to Rodgers and Hart with "Oliver's Army"'s B-side "My Funny Valentine" and recently given him a Japanese No 1 with Charlie Chaplin's "Smile", as well as readmittance to the UK Top 20 with Charles Aznavour's "She". This was a style that could also be traced through *Painted From Memory* and the low-key loveliness of *All This Useless Beauty*'s "I Want To Vanish". "It isn't a standards-related record," Costello cautioned *CMJ* magazine. "It has as much to do with the songs I've listened to from the 19th Century as songs from the 1940s and '50s. Certainly the emotional language of these songs is much less coded than you would find in the era of Ira Gershwin or Lorenz Hart."

Much less coded, too, than he had previously been himself. These songs are written by a man stunned with love. Their tone is dreamy, concussed, disbelieving, that of someone not quite himself. They fall between eras, writing the blunt romantic confessions of Laurel Canyon singer-songwriters in the style of anonymously wounded song-cycles from an earlier time; *Frank Sinatra Sings For Only The Lonely*, say. Most remarkably, *North* is an inarticulate album. As if infantilised by his romance with Krall, Costello's usually jungle-thick vocabulary has vanished. "Someone Took The Words Away", set during the end of the affair with O'Riordan, says this directly. "*A change has come over me/I'm powerless to express/...And if I try my voice will break*," he realises. Summoning "*my powers of conversation*", he can talk to himself, but with the lover he's losing he's baffled and speechless. "*All these things I can't quite place/Perhaps they're written on my face?*" he hopes. With words uniquely failing a dumbstruck Costello, he hands Konitz the task of expressing his feelings. The saxophonist, who made his name on Miles Davis' *Birth Of The Cool* sessions in



THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"This drab sequence of Rodgers & Hart-style ballads is so arid and mannered you just wanna yell, 'Stop farting about with old dead forms and write something NEW!'"
BARNEY HOSKYNS, UNCUT, NOVEMBER 2003

1949, responds with a quietly conversational, worldly-wise, sadly accepting solo.

North's first half takes us through the meeting with Krall ("You Turned To Me") to "When It Sings"' fond farewell to O'Riordan: "*Maybe this is the love song I refused to/Write her when I loved her like I used to.*" Peter Erskine is all delicate brushwork, the drums themselves barely intruding, as Costello maturely describes his marriage's dismantlement.

Teasing these feelings from *North*'s minimal, static, hushed arrangements requires close attention, and closer interest in a private life Costello wasn't discussing in interviews. The heartfelt gushing of *North*'s Krall-adoring second half tests the patience still more. "*Friends now regard me with indulgent smiles/But when I start to speak, they run for miles*," Costello knowingly concedes on "Let Me Tell You About Her". The Brodsky Quartet accompany "Still" on its melody's gentle upward curve, an optimistic climb recurring through the rest of the album, which fills with torch songs interesting only for their giddy gaucheness: "*I want to kiss you in a rush/And whisper things to make you blush...*" These are love letters straight from the heart, rashly posted to the rest of the world.

"*There's something indescribable/I still can't catch*," Costello puzzles on "Let Me Tell You About Her", as its piano melody pirouettes with lazy pleasure, like Astaire dancing down the stairs in slow motion. The grace notes a Cole Porter could find in breezy love lyrics just won't come. All Costello can manage are the platitudes of any rube who's head over heels. "Someday I wanna hear him duet with Tony Bennett on this song," Al Kooper enthused of "When Green Eyes Turn Blue", but it's doubtful a singer used to Tin Pan Alley's best would bother.

Costello had left himself wide open with *North*, and the response was chastening. It managed less than half the 200,000 sales of *When I Was Cruel*'s US comeback, and reviews were generally suspicious. Even an attempt to sing "Someone Took the Words Away" with the affable Konitz in a New York jazz club was thwarted, when his bassist refused to share the stage with a rock singer. The borders Costello liked to ignore remained up. "I know that everything on the record is true, and I know that I feel it," he said in *North*'s defence. The simple musical life wasn't really for him. But just once, he had to get happy.

TRACKMARKS NORTH

1. Prelude/You Left Me In The Dark ★★★
2. Someone Took The Words Away ★★★★
3. When Did I Stop Dreaming ★★
4. You Turned To Me ★★
5. Fallen ★★★
6. When It Sings ★★★
7. Still ★★★★
8. Let Me Tell You About Her ★★★★
9. Can You Be True? ★★
10. When Green Eyes Turn Blue ★★★
11. I'm In The Mood Again ★★★

Label: Deutsche Grammophon
Produced by: Elvis Costello
Recorded at: Avatar, NYC
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, piano), Steve Nieve (keys), Brad Jones (bass), Michael Formanck (bs), Peter Erskine (drums), Lee Konitz (alto sax), Bill Ware (vibraphone), The Brodsky Quartet, Sarah Adams, Diane Barere, Elena Barere, Avril Brown, Timothy Cobb, Cenovia Cummins, Jacqui Danilow, Jonathan Dinklage, Karen Dreyfus, Cecilia Hobbs Gardner, Crystal Garner, Maura Giannini, Yana Goichman, Joyce Hammann, Regis Iandiorio, Ann Leathers, Jeanne LeBlanc, Richard Locker, Jan Mullen, Paul Peabody, Sue Pray, Maxine Roach, Stacey Shames, Richard Sortomme, Marti Sweet, Dave Taylor, Yuri Vodovov, Carol Webb, Ellen Westerman, Peter Winograd, Rebecca Young, Frederick Zlotkin (strings), Conrad Herwig, Bob Carlisle, Dave Mann, Bobby Routch, Lew Soloff, Pamela Sklar, John Moses, Roger Rosenberg (woodwind)
Highest chart position: UK 44; US 57

THE DELIVERY MAN/ IL SOGNO

Special deliveries! Two albums arrive on one day: a country-soul extravaganza with Emmylou and Lucinda; and an Italian ballet score. BY NICK HASTED

RELEASED SEPTEMBER 21, 2004

WITH *NORTH* OUT of his system, Elvis took The Imposters south, to a stone-walled studio in Oxford, Mississippi. The original plan had been to follow *When I Was Cruel* with hit-and-run raids on small, atmospheric studios, recording new songs as they toured them across the American South. Some of Elvis' favourite records, after all, had been bashed out for local labels beneath the Mason-Dixon line. Delayed by *North*, The Imposters mostly stayed put in Oxford's Sweet Pea Studios to record *The Delivery Man* during April 2004, briefly detouring to nearby Clarksdale. They played sweat-soaked sets at Proud Larry's bar in Oxford to test songs out, then finished them in the studio with the club's sound system. Headphones were out; the messy sonic spillage of a band playing on the studio floor was in.

The first album credited to Elvis Costello & The Imposters was a slower, distant cousin to The Attractions' *Get Happy!!*. Rather than speed-ripped Motown and Stax, this was Elvis's country-soul record. One of the genre's great songwriters and musicians, Dan Penn, was credited as "Leading Light". *I Never Loved A Man The Way I Loved You*, an Aretha Franklin LP Penn partly wrote that Costello's dad had given to him years before, was a key inspiration.

Half the 14 songs were from *The Delivery Man*, a song-cycle Costello had toyed with since 1999. "It's sort of a 19th Century idea," he explained to *Performing Songwriter* magazine, "of three women living in a community, isolated enough that their options are limited to those that come into their life." Abel, who killed as a child and returns to his hometown as an unrecognised adult, stirs the women in this slice of Southern gothic. Wisely, Costello chose to scatter these songs across a broader, often riotous record.

"Button My Lip" fades in on The Imposters already in motion, over-heated guitar, pulsing bass and steam-hammer cymbals tumbling forward, as Steve Nieve stabs out a taunting snatch of *West Side Story*'s "America" and Costello, in the year of the Iraq invasion, sneers: *"I don't want to talk about the government..."* This slice of a nine-minute performance cuts out like the plug being pulled. It merges into "Country Darkness", a majestic ballad built on the stately progress of Nieve's piano, John McPhee's pedal steel and the restrained passion of Costello's vocal. *The Delivery Man* flicks confidently between these songs' poles, with the consistency of music made quickly in the place it's about by a road-sharpened band.

Lucinda Williams and Emmylou Harris (recorded separately in LA and Nashville) chip in as the women of the original song-cycle. Thick with character and narrative when its thread is picked up, this climaxes with "The Name Of This Thing Is Not Love", a thrilling, punched-home ballad sung with venom and sympathy, as an affair furiously ends with *"a bruise on her arm and some blood on the floor."*

Costello rounds up other suitable recent work. "The Scarlet Tide", co-written with T Bone Burnett for the soundtrack to cod-*Gone With The Wind* saga *Cold Mountain* and already a failed Oscar nominee, replaces the original's Alison Krauss with Harris. The grandiose "The Judgement" had been written for Solomon Burke's comeback LP, just as "Either Side Of The Same Town" was co-written with Jerry Ragavoy for forgotten soul man Howard Tate's return.

None of these are as much fun as "Bedlam", a hilarious fever dream of motel hell in "Tokyo Storm Warning"'s rolling, ranting tradition, which widens its surreal canvas to include Palestine, Crusaders and Moors. These allusions were part of an urgent interest in post-9/11 politics that, Costello said, replaced much of the original *Delivery Man* project.

"Monkey To Man" – evolution seen from the despairing apes' perspective – and "She's Pulling Out The Pin", all slow-burning swagger and saloon piano as a vengeful woman blows a social occasion to pieces, are brightly funny, too. "Needle Time" then slips in the album's most telling line, about "*the time I started to tire of*

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"*The Delivery Man* is a strong and lusty country-punk album, placing him in Tom Waits or Neil Young territory. EC hasn't sounded this energised for years. It still proves that 50-year-olds can rock out with dignity." STEPHEN DALTON, UNCUT, NOVEMBER 2004

those sour English". He had lived in Ireland with his second wife since 1989, and was about to move to Canada with his third. His main 21st Century audience was American. A 2002 V Festival appearance in front of "sullen little Thatcher's children" and a 2005 Glastonbury show were occasions of mutual contempt. *The Delivery Man* began a decade of Americana-steeped albums, with few references to an England that anyway ignored his new work.

Italy was kinder. The Aterballetto dance company had rewarded Costello's self-education in writing scores by inviting him to do so for a ballet based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Il Sogno* was premiered in Bologna in 2000. Its score was recorded at Abbey Road in 2002 by the London Symphony Orchestra, and finally released on the same day as *The Delivery Man*, Costello nimbly exploiting Universal's vastness to use Americana label Lost Highway and Deutsche Grammophon for the relevant records.

Costello found more difficulties than he had with The Brodsky Quartet as he headed deeper into the classical world. LSO conductor Michael Tilson Thomas tutored him in editing the score, which Costello typically wanted "to be full of quick and interesting incidents". Slashing Bernard Herrmann-style strings climax the "The Jealousy Of Helena"'s manically dense 55 seconds, characteristic of hyperactive music that includes bullet-blasts of sax, finger-snapping city swing and romantic sweeps of woodwind and strings, finishing at a gallop.

Il Sogno was respectfully received in the classical world. Of course, Costello's entry there late in life was unlikely to result in achievements equal to *The Delivery Man*. But that wasn't the point. "It doesn't mean I can write as well or be equal to any of the people that trigger you to attempt another form," he told *Gramophone*. "But what happens is that your sense of the mystery of music is enriched."

TRACKMARKS THE DELIVERY MAN

1. Button My Lip ★★★★
2. Country Darkness ★★★★
3. There's A Story In Your Voice ★★★
4. Either Side Of The Same Town ★★★
5. Bedlam ★★★★
6. The Delivery Man ★★★
7. Monkey To Man ★★★
8. Nothing Clings Like Ivy ★★★
9. The Name Of This Thing Is Not Love ★★★★
10. Heart Shaped Bruise ★★
11. She's Pulling Out The Pin ★★★★
12. Needle Time ★★★★
13. The Judgement ★★★
14. The Scarlet Tide ★★★

Label: Lost Highway
Produced by: Dennis Herring, Elvis Costello
Recorded at: Sweet Tea, Oxford, Mississippi; Delta Recording, Clarksdale, Mississippi; Village Recorders, Los Angeles; Ocean Way Studios, Nashville
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitar, bass, piano, tambourine, glockenspiel, ukulele), Steve Nieve (piano, keyboards, omnichord, theremin, harmonium), Davey Faragher (bass), Pete Thomas (drums), Lucinda Williams (vocals), Emmylou Harris (vocals), John McPhee (pedal steel guitar)
Highest chart position: UK 73, US 40

IL SOGNO

1. Prelude ★★
2. Overture ★★
3. Puck 1 ★★★
4. The Court ★★★
5. The State Of Affairs ★★★
6. Hermia And Lysander ★★★
7. The Jealousy Of Helena ★★★
8. Worker's Playtime ★★★★
9. Oberon And Titania ★★★
10. The Conspiracy Of Oberon And Puck ★★
11. Slumber ★★★
12. Puck 2 ★★★
13. The Identity Parade ★★★★
14. The Face Of Bottom ★★
15. The Spark Of Love ★★★★
16. Tormentress ★★★★
17. Oberon Humbled ★★★
18. Twisted – Entangled – Transform And Exchange ★★★
19. The Fairy And The Ass ★★★
20. Sleep ★★★
21. Bottom Awakes ★★★
22. Lovers Arise ★★★
23. The Play ★★
24. The Wedding ★★★

Label: Deutsche Grammophon
Produced by: Elvis Costello
Recorded at: Abbey Road, London
Personnel: Elvis Costello (composer), Michael Tilson Thomas (conductor), John Harle (saxophone), Peter Erskine (percussion), Chris Laurence (double bass), London Symphony Orchestra
Highest chart position: n/a

THE RIVER IN REVERSE

In Katrina's wake, Costello and Allen Toussaint come together for a righteous celebration of Crescent City sounds. BY JOHN LEWIS

RELEASED JUNE 6, 2006

WHEN HURRICANE KATRINA destroyed huge parts of New Orleans at the end of August 2005, one of Elvis Costello's first concerns was for the well-being of his friends in the city – in particular Allen Toussaint, who went missing for several days after the deluge. His house, near the Fair Grounds Race Course, had been badly damaged, while his fabled Sea-Saint studio had been utterly destroyed.

Costello, still unaware of his friend's whereabouts, played the Bumbershoot festival in Seattle on September 5 and closed his set with two Toussaint songs – "Freedom For The Stallion" and "All These Things" – played solo for voice and guitar: "That was just my way of sending out a little message, the way you do with music, not really knowing where it goes."

A week later, Costello and his wife Diana Krall were asked by Wynton Marsalis to play a benefit concert for the victims of Hurricane Katrina in New York's Lincoln Center. By this time, Costello had learned that Toussaint had got out of Louisiana just after Katrina and relocated in Manhattan, and the pair ended up duetting on a version of "Freedom For The Stallion" at the gig on September 17. It was the first of three benefit concerts they'd play together – including one at Madison Square Garden – and Costello quickly decided that it would be a good idea to do a songbook of Allen Toussaint's compositions. Verve Records agreed and, within two months, Costello (and his Imposters) and Toussaint (and his Crescent City Horns) were recording an album together, helmed by Joe Henry. It took them a week at Sunset Sound in Los Angeles and another week in Piety Street, one of the few New Orleans studios to survive Katrina.

Costello had long been a fan of Toussaint's music. As far back as 1974, friends recall Toussaint LPs in his collection, alongside early Toussaint-produced seven-inch singles on the Mint label (for much of the '60s and '70s, Toussaint was the Phil Spector of New Orleans). They first made contact in 1983 when Costello, in New Orleans with the Dexys horn section, approached Toussaint to produce a wonderfully offbeat version of Yoko Ono's "Walking On Thin Ice" (something you'll find on the 1986 compilation *Out Of Our Idiot*). Six years later, Toussaint was part of the all-star lineup for *Spike*, lending a Big Easy stomp to "Deep Dark Truthful Mirror". In 1986 Costello recorded Toussaint's "All These Things" during the sessions for *Blood & Chocolate*; even the *Trust*-era favourite, "From A Whisper To A Scream", is a nod to a Toussaint song of the same name.

This being Costello, the Toussaint songs here are the choices of an aficionado, not a dilettante. There are none of Toussaint's best-known hits – no "Working In A Coalmine" or "Southern Nights", no "Ride Your Pony", "Fortune Teller", "Hercules" or "Everything I Do Gonna Be Funky". Instead Costello digs deep to find relatively obscure '60s and '70s sides. The arrangements – anchored around the churchy interplay between Toussaint on piano and Steve Nieve on Hammond B3 – are also entrenched in antique New Orleans R'n'B.

The album opens with "On Your Way Down", a slow-burning, gumbo-fried gospel track originally written for Lee Dorsey in 1973 and subsequently covered by Little Feat. When Dorsey sang: "*The same people you misuse on your way up/You might meet up/On your way down*", he did so with a mix of resignation and sly optimism, a belief that things are going to get better. Costello has no such illusions, spitting out the lyrics with a measured viciousness that he maintains for much of the album.

The aforementioned "Freedom For The Stallion" is another gospel-ish civil rights song from 1973, dealing with harrowing images of

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"With Allen Toussaint leading the crack band of Attractions and New Orleans session men from the piano, Costello takes lead vocals on most tracks, singing with the enthusiasm and fun of a true fan." ANDY GILL, UNCUT, JULY 2006

slavery ("*Big ships are sailing/slaves all chained and bound*") and exploitation ("*They got men making laws that destroy other men*"). Where the versions by Dorsey, Toussaint and the Hues Corporation had a serene, hymnal dignity, Costello can't hide his anger. Even on "Tears, Tears And More Tears", a jaunty, high-stepping break-up song, Costello sings about betrayal as if he's investigating the ineptitude of FEMA during Katrina. This is an angry album for a New Orleans that had been destroyed by government mismanagement as much as natural disaster.

If Costello, like so many of the singers that Toussaint wrote for, is a big-lunged yelper, Toussaint's own voice is a quiet whisper. That contrast is particularly evident on "Who's Gonna Help Brother Get Further", the only song where Toussaint takes the lead vocal. "*Whatever happened to the Liberty Bell we heard so much about?*" he sighs. "*Did it really ding-dong? It didn't ding long.*" When Costello reprises the line towards the end of the song, he invests it with a certain English sarcasm.

The post-Katrina imagery becomes even more complex where Costello is writing the lyrics. The title track, which seems to have been built on a slowed-down version of "Hercules" (the classic Toussaint wrote for Aaron Neville), paints the flood as a metaphor for the rightward drift of American politics ("*An uncivil war divides the nation*"). "Broken Promise Land" glues together an uptempo funk rocker with a Beatlesy bridge, with suitably edgy lyrics ("*How high we gonna build this wall*"). "The Sharpest Thorn" is a fine waltz – rich in Biblical imagery – which has more than a passing resemblance to "The Scarlet Tide" (from *The Delivery Man*).

Best of all is "International Echo", which channels the crate-digging soul fan of *Get Happy!!*, apparently celebrating all those seven-inch singles Toussaint produced for the Mint, Ace and Instant labels ("*I felt the pulse in a drum tattoo/Even though I knew it was taboo*").

As well as Costello and Toussaint, "Ascension Day" is also credited to Roy Byrd, aka Professor Longhair, and is based on Toussaint's instrumental "Tipitina And Me", which resets Longhair's rambunctious boogie-woogie classic "Tipitina" in a minor key. Here Costello's cryptic lyrics gel with Toussaint's stately instrumental, and the result is his most controlled vocal take.

The album was regarded by many as Costello's most effective collaboration to date. Toussaint certainly benefited, saying that the LP had transformed him from a backroom studio presence into something of a marquee name. "Katrina turned out to be a good booking agent," he said, wryly.

TRACKMARKS THE RIVER IN REVERSE

1. On Your Way Down ★★★
2. Nearer To You ★★★
3. Tears, Tears And More Tears ★★★★
4. The Sharpest Thorn ★★★
5. Who's Gonna Help Brother Get Further? ★★★★
6. The River In Reverse ★★★
7. Freedom For The Stallion ★★★★
8. Broken Promise Land ★★★
9. Ascension Day ★★★★
10. International Echo ★★★★
11. All These Things ★★★
12. Wonder Woman ★★★
13. Six-Fingered Man ★★★★

Label: Verve Forecast
Recorded at: Sunset Sound, Hollywood; Piety Street Recording Studios, Bywater, New Orleans
Produced by: Joe Henry
Personel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitars, Hammond organ), Allen Toussaint (vocals, piano, horn arrangements), Steve Nieve (Hammond organ, piano, clavinet, Farfisa organ), Davey Faragher (bass, backing vocals), Pete Thomas (drums), Anthony Brown (guitar), Carl Blouin (baritone sax), Amadee Castenell (tenor and soprano sax), Joe Smith (trumpet), Sam Williams (trombone)
Highest chart position: UK 97; US 103

MOMOFUKU

"All we had to do to make this record was add water!" Recorded at speed, released in stealth – try Instant Elvis... BY TERRY STAUNTON

RELEASED APRIL 22, 2008

AT THE TAIL-END of 2007, a full two years since he last spent any lengthy amount of time in a recording studio, making *The River In Reverse*, Elvis Costello told the British press that the collaboration with Allen Toussaint may well have been his last album. The rock'n'roll business model had changed dramatically, he suggested, and live performance was the way forward for any musician who wanted to continue making a living.

"It's what I really love to do," he said. "In fact, I'm not of a mind to record any more, there's no point. Making a record requires me to take all the money that the label advances me and give it to other people – musicians, producers and studio owners – and then I spend six months doing the record company's job for them, because they won't pay anybody to do the things they used to do, like promote and market.

"Anyway, in terms of recorded music, the pact's been broken, the personal connection between the artist and the listener. MP3 has dismantled the intended shape of an album."

Two weeks into the new year, however, he changed his mind, after a flying visit to Sound City Studios in Los Angeles, where members of The Imposters were backing Jenny Lewis on what would become her second solo album, *Acid Tongue*. Having laid down a duet vocal on "Carpetbaggers", he enquired about the future availability of the studio and promptly booked eight days in February for himself.

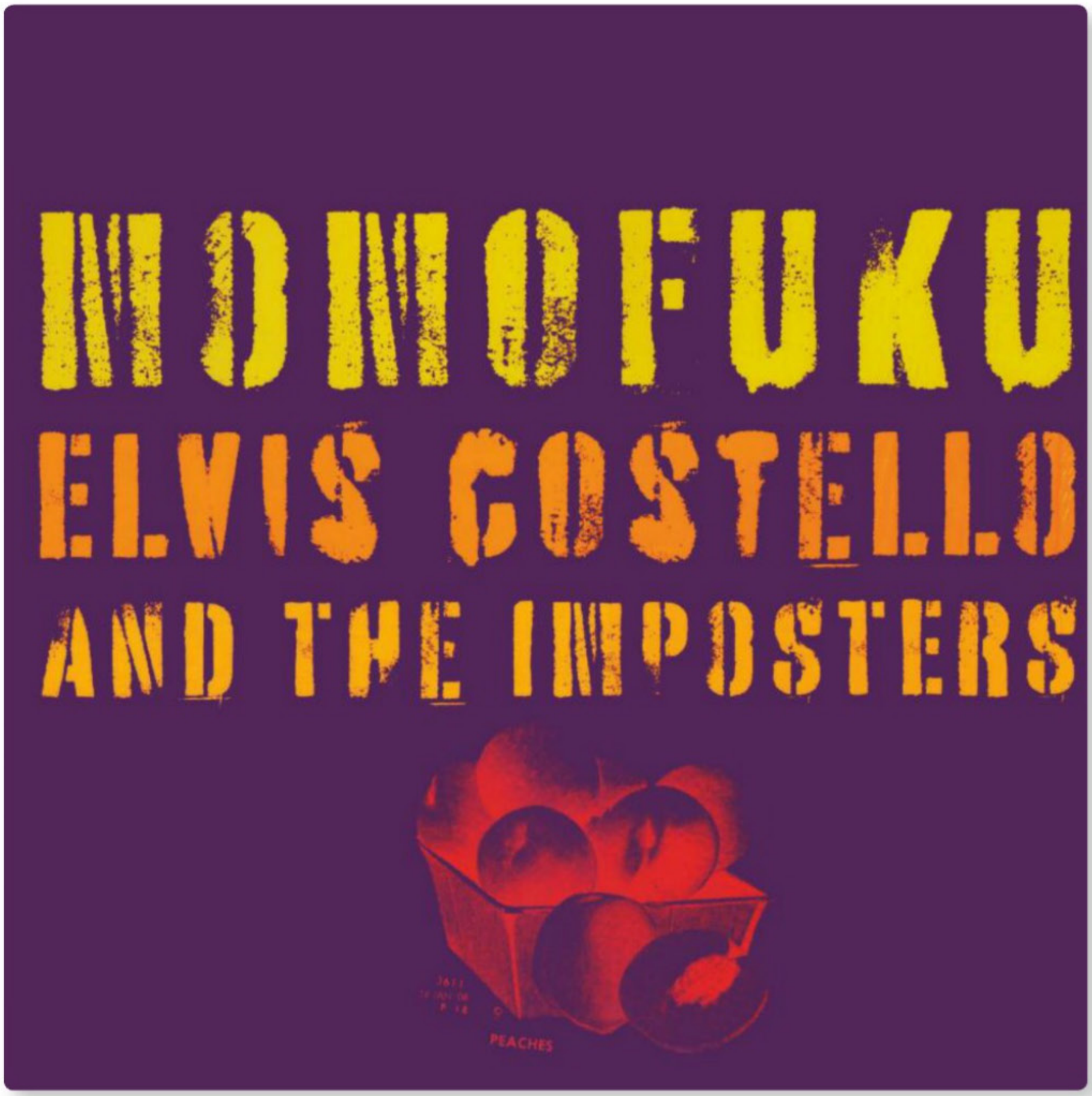
In what was perhaps a wilful "fuck you" to the slow-moving behemoth music industry, *Momofuku* was laid down with extraordinary haste, the quickest album he'd made since the cumulative 24 hours it took to record his *My Aim Is True* debut more than 30 years earlier. The parallels to his formative years didn't end there; in terms of energy and immediacy, the new record contained echoes of the high-octane *This Year's Model*, relatively brief tracks punctuated by short sharp stabs of guitar and Steve Nieve's organ.

Though well into his fifties, Costello appears to relish revisiting the angry young man of those early albums, laying in to gung-ho flag-waving patriotism on the garage-like sneer of "American Gangster Time" ("*It's a drag/Saluting that starry rag*") and chronicling the frustrations of hamstrung lovers on "Stella Hurt". "Turpentine", meanwhile, takes a wry look at the excesses of his twentysomething self.

Yet beyond the all-our-yesterdays new wave touchstones, *Momofuku* also takes time to catch its breath and leaf through some less frenetic back pages. The Kinks-like "Mr Feathers" recalls the vaudevillian shuffle of "God's Comic" from 1989's *Spike*, while "Pardon Me Madam, My Name Is Eve", co-written with Nashville icon Loretta Lynn, is a stately country melodrama where a wronged woman confronts her husband's lover. It sounds like it was finished just too late to make the cut for 2004's *The Delivery Man*.

For the most part, it's a pure Imposters album, Nieve, bassist Davey Faragher and drummer Pete Thomas breaking into regular sweats on fast and furious single takes, although Jenny Lewis and her beau Johnathan Rice add occasional spirited harmonies, and Thomas' daughter Tennessee, drummer with the LA-based all-girl trio The Like, picks up the sticks to bring extra oomph to "Stella Hurt".

The bulk of Costello's output over the previous decade had adhered to themes, either in terms of their lyrical concerns (the



THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"Don't panic, it's not a ballet or a string quartet, but Costello sounding more Attractions-like than he has in over 20 years. These 12 songs were recorded in a week and the Imposters seem galvanised by Costello's songwriting frenzy." ADAM SWEETING, UNCUT OCTOBER 2008

romantic autopsies of *North*, the post-Katrina commentaries of *The River In Reverse*) or musical palette (the orchestral sweep of the Bacharach two-hander *Painted From Memory*, the loops and shuffles of *When I Was Cruel*), but for a record made in such a condensed period of time, *Momofuku* is remarkably diverse.

"Harry Worth" indulges his lounge crooner persona, first heard on "The Long Honeymoon" (*Imperial Bedroom*), "Flutter And Wow" takes a detour into smooth '70s soul balladry, but amid the otherwise pleasing genre-hopping there's the mawkish misstep of "My Three Sons", a pedestrian paean to his grown-up first born and the twin boys he'd recently had with jazz singer and pianist Diana Krall; an awkward dollop of syrup next to the rest of the album's venting of spleens.

To say *Momofuku* crept out without fanfare is an understatement. Disillusioned by the sluggish music-biz machine, Costello chose not to climb aboard the promotional treadmill and gave no interviews to herald its arrival. His original intention of making it a download- or vinyl-only release stood firm for less than a month, before he was persuaded to sign off on CD availability. But the absence of any marketing push meant it failed to register on any major territory charts – it's peak position, worldwide, was No 34 in Norway.

His only public utterance about the album was a couple of throwaway paragraphs on his official website: "The absence of much advance notice or information might seem a little strange," he conceded, "but the record was made so quickly that I didn't even tell myself about it for a couple of weeks."

He did, however, address the album's title, claiming it was his tribute to the Taiwanese-Japanese businessman Momofuko Ando, the man who developed the "technology" behind Pot Noodles, who'd died the previous year. "Like many things in this world of wonders," Costello wrote, "all we had to do to make this record was add water."

So there it is, then; Elvis Costello's most instant album, which only weeks before he appeared to have no intention of making. But despite its fast-food convenience methodology, *Momofuku* nonetheless delivers several rich flavours, unshackled by the rule-following recipes and concepts that had driven many of its immediate predecessors and the records that were to follow it.

TRACKMARKS MOMOFUKU

1. No Hiding Place ★★★★
2. American Gangster Time ★★★★
3. Turpentine ★★★
4. Harry Worth ★★★
5. Drum And Bone ★★★
6. Flutter And Wow ★★★★
7. Stella Hurt ★★★★
8. Mr Feathers ★★★
9. My Three Sons ★★
10. Song With Rose ★★★★
11. Pardon Me Madam, My Name Is Eve ★★★★
12. Go Away ★★★

Label: Lost Highway
Produced by: Elvis Costello and Jason Lader
Recorded at: Sound City, Los Angeles
Personnel: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitar, piano, organ), Steve Nieve (piano, organ, clavinet), Davey Faragher (bass, backing vocals), Pete Thomas (drums), David Hidalgo (guitar, backing vocals), Jenny Lewis (backing vocals), Jonathan Wilson (guitar, backing vocals), Johnathan Rice (guitar, backing vocals), "Farmer" Dave Scher (pedal steel, lap steel, organ, backing vocals), Tennessee Thomas (drums)
Highest chart position: UK/US n/a

SECRET, PROFANE & SUGARCANE

A sequel to *King Of America*? Or extracts from an opera about Hans Christian Andersen? EC's schizophrenic 25th. BY DAVID QUANTICK

RELEASED JUNE 9, 2009

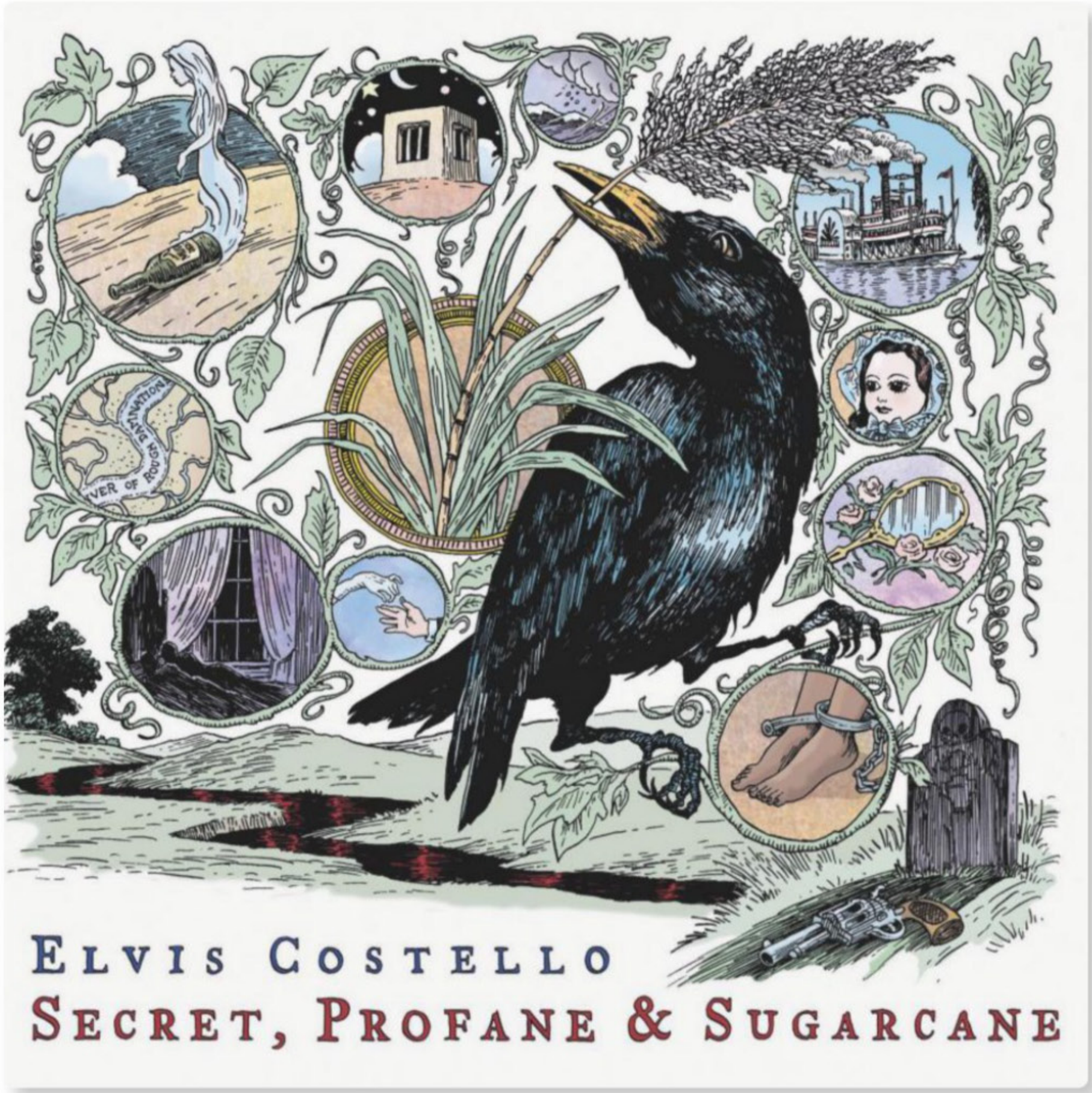
YOU KNOW HOW Neil Young does all these albums where the songs don't have any real connection save for the fact that they're on the new Neil Young album? So you'll get two songs from the 1970s, a reworking of a B-side, something new, something from a soundtrack and maybe even an old live recording – a snapshot cross-section of whatever's going through or coming out of the great man's head... Well, that's pretty much how Elvis Costello's 25th album can feel at times. Of course, it's not utterly incoherent, being Elvis Costello, and it reveals its treasures over time like a really slow stripper, but it is at base a collaboration between Mister Hodge and Mister Podge.

On the surface, if you're in a hurry, it's 'King Of America 2', a collaboration between Costello and T Bone Burnett with a countryish band featuring double bass, mandolin, acoustic guitar, backing vocals by Emmylou Harris and Jim Lauderdale and not any synthesisers. It was recorded in three days, a classic Costello technique for shaking up the juices creative, and it features not one but three bona fide country songs – the gorgeous oldie "Changing Partners" (a hit for Patti Page in 1953), "Hidden Shame" (written by Costello for and recorded by Johnny Cash and also appearing on his 1990 album *Boom Chicka Boom*) and "I Felt The Chill Before The Winter Came" (written by Costello and Loretta Lynn in Johnny Cash's cabin but not appearing on her 2004 *Van Lear Rose* album). And there's a new version of "Complicated Shadows", written for Cash in 1996 but not recorded by him). Oh, and on some editions, there's an engaging accordion-powered skip through The Velvet Underground's Cajun classic "Femme Fatale".

All of this would be more than enough for most artists – actually, all this would be more than exhausting enough for most artists – but this is Elvis Costello. And he's written an opera – commissioned by the Royal Danish Opera in 2005 – about Danish national treasure Hans Christian Andersen (an artist with whom he has previous, having ended 1979's "Sunday's Best" with a quick burst of "Wonderful, Wonderful Copenhagen"). Except it's not just about Hans Christian Andersen, it's about Andersen's unrequited love for the singer Jenny Lind, the "Swedish Nightingale". And it's not just about the unrequited love of Denmark's national treasure for the Swedish Nightingale, it's also about Jenny Lind's 1850-1852 tour of America and that tour's promoter, PT Barnum. And it's also about slavery, and to some extent slavery's links to Liverpool. (I haven't heard *The Secret Songs* – the name of the opera, which also provides the "secret" in this album's title – but I've read some of its excellent lyrics online – there's a great bird pun – and would like to see it. But I digress.)

So, being an Elvis Costello album, it doesn't just contain an album's worth of country songs and Americana numbers old and new, it's got five songs from a Danish opera. (Songs not included from *The Secret Songs* include "American Humbug", "My Toy Theatre", "Illustrated Lady", "She Was No Good", "The Misfit" and "The Famous Artificial Bird" – great titles all, and with luck we'll be hearing them soon).

Fortunately, also being an Elvis Costello



THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"The songs are for the most part sharply serviceable, if not indelible, the playing impeccable, the sounds as overtone-rich and immediate as we've come to expect from T Bone Burnett and Mike Piersante. Most crucially, Costello manages to play along with Burnett's in-soft/out-LOUD approach, making this his most engaging album in a very long time."
BUD SCOPPA, UNCUT, JULY 2009

album, the two (or more) groups of songs hang together fairly well, recorded as they are with the same band in the same studio at the same time by the same producer, and thus not suffering from the awful jarring audioclash that several similar attempts by other artists to weld a pony to a mule have suffered from in the past.

You can tell which songs are from the opera and which aren't quite easily – the opera songs often have the slightly atonal quality of Costello's *Juliet Letters* material as well as lyrics like, "*The slave ship 'Blessing' slipped from Liverpool/Over the waves the Royal Navy rules/To go and plunder the Kingdom of Benin/Where certain history ends and shame begins*" ("Red Cotton"), while the country songs sound like country songs and have lyrics like, "*Well, there's a different kind of prison/And it don't even have to look much like a cell*" ("Hidden Shame"). And there are songs whose lyrics and melodies are just unmistakeably Elvis Costello, like "All Time Doll" (sadly only the third Costello song with "Doll" in the title) and "Down Among The Wines And Spirits", the opening track and a song that would have fitted on *King Of America* like a screwtop lid on a whiskey bottle.

You won't find a classic hit single here, or a ballad that takes your heart out through your ribcage, but this is an album with gradually plumbable depths. There's the fiddling glide of "Crooked Lines", with Emmylou Harris and Costello as the Everly Siblings. There's the wonderful return of the *Almost Blue* croon on "I Felt The Chill Before The Winter Came". On "Sulphur To Sugarcane", there's Costello's sleaziest and most rhyming-dictionary-brilliant lyric since I don't know when ("*The women in Poughkeepsie/Take their clothes off when they're tipsy/But I hear in Ypsilanti/They don't wear any panties*"). The cover of "Changing Partners" is sincere as can be, and that of "Femme Fatale" is dafter than a village idiot. And the songs from *The Secret Songs*, while often statelier than a galleon's aunt, reveal their charms and grace over time outside their original context. Messrs Hodge and Podge would be proud.

TRACKMARKS SECRET, PROFANE & SUGARCANE

1. Down Among The Wines And Spirits ★★★
2. Complicated Shadows ★★★
3. I Felt The Chill Before The Winter Came ★★★★
4. My All Time Doll ★★★
5. Hidden Shame ★★★
6. She Handed Me A Mirror ★★★
7. I Dreamed Of My Old Lover ★★★
8. How Deep Is The Red? ★★★
9. She Was No Good ★★★
10. Sulphur To Sugarcane ★★★★
11. Red Cotton ★★★★
12. The Crooked Line ★★★★
13. Changing Partners ★★★★

Label: Hear Music
Produced by: T Bone Burnett
Recorded and mixed by: Michael Piersante
Recorded at: The Sound Emporium, Nashville

Personnel: Elvis Costello (acoustic guitar, vocals), T Bone Burnett (electric guitar), Jeff Taylor (accordion), Mike Compton (mandolin), Dennis Crouch (double bass), Jerry Douglas (dobro), Stuart Duncan (banjo, fiddle), Emmylou Harris (harmony vocals), Jim Lauderdale (harmony vocals)
Highest chart position: UK 71; US 13

NATIONAL RANSOM

A brilliant storyteller summons his uncanny cast... Forlorn music-hall singers. Ghosts of WWI deserters. Doc Watson. Jean Charles de Menezes... BY JASON ANDERSON

RELEASED OCTOBER 25, 2010

NEVER LESS THAN careful as a lyricist, Elvis Costello is unusually specific about his intentions with the songs on *National Ransom*. In the sleevenotes for his fourth full-length collaboration with producer T Bone Burnett after *King Of America*, *Spike* and the preceding year's *Secret, Profane & Sugarcane*, the lyric sheets are appended with settings for the characters and stories presented in the songs. "Doldrum, Rowley Moor – 1937" reads the note for "Jimmie Standing In The Rain", a suitably jazzy-sounding vignette about a forlorn music-hall singer stuck on a Lancashire train platform "*between the very memory and approaches of war*". More raucous in nature is "Five Small Words", a buoyant country rocker about a love laid waste by indiscretions "*so merciful and brief*" that reputedly transpired in "Tucson, Arizona – 1978". The mournful, strings-laden ballad "You Hung The Moon" invites listeners inside a London drawing room circa 1919, where a séance to summon the ghost of a dead army deserter is taking place.

Those who prefer matters to be more ambiguous can find some respite in "My Lovely Jezebel", which has garnered the tagline of "Everywhere Until Either 1938 Or 1951. According To Some." Meanwhile, the Costello fans who get a kick out of these embellishments may wish he'd gotten around to it sooner – they might even come up with a few of their own. For "Alison", let's go with "Two Nights After A Dismal Wedding Reception In Hounslow: 1974."

In any case, this literary flourish adds some welcome novelty value to an album that may not stretch beyond the rootsy parameters set out by *Secret, Profane*... but contains a wealth of strong material. Eclectic without losing focus and rich in textures and detail without seeming overstuffed, *National Ransom* is enormously appealing, even if it doesn't entirely escape the problems that often plague those latter-day efforts, like a reluctance to self-edit and the occasional failure to combine all the clever bits and bobs into genuinely memorable songs.

Haste may be an issue here, with sessions taking place over only 11 days in Nashville and Los Angeles. The two-dozen-plus ensemble of players was sufficiently fired up to burn through not just the 16 songs included here but several more, too. (A cover of Bobby Charles' "I Hope" was released as an iTunes bonus track and three more originals and a rendition of Eddy Raven's "Big Boys Cry" were bundled together as a digital download and a 10-inch vinyl EP.) Besides making use of all of the members of The Imposters and The Sugarcanes, Costello found room for such guests as Leon Russell, Marc Ribot, Vince Gill and Jim Lauderdale.

As convivial as the atmosphere among the players might've been, they could've benefited from more direction. A perfunctory R'n'B vamp that mysteriously fades out just as Russell's piano part shows signs of life, "My Lovely Jezebel" belonged with the outtakes. The discordant slivers of Sonic Youth-ful guitar skronk that Ribot adds to "The Spell That You Cast" make a cluttered song even more confusing. Thankfully, Gill makes a more effective contribution with his harmony vocal on "Dr Watson, I Presume", a lovely string-band song in which Costello provides a beguilingly mythic take on his first meeting with bluegrass legend Doc Watson a few years before.

It's hardly a surprise that many of *National Ransom*'s most spirited songs feature Steve Nieve and Pete Thomas, his erstwhile Attractions and present-day Imposters. A beefy descendant of "Seven Day Weekend", "National Ransom" opens the album with a combination of fat-cat-bashing pique and blustery pub-rock

THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"This veers away from the bluegrass stylings of *Secret, Profane & Sugarcane* towards a kind of orchestrated R'n'B with flurries of old-time whimsy. The Beatles gone gothic and vaudevillian storytelling, it's dense and sometimes obscure." ALASTAIR McKAY, UNCUT, NOVEMBER 2010

swagger (Ribot's shredding is far more appreciated here). The vividly rendered saga of a failed Hollywood hopeful and her final shot at spiritual redemption, "Church Underground" gradually builds in power until achieving a satisfying sense of widescreen grandeur with its swelling of horns and a final swirl of organ.

Several more country-oriented numbers provide other treasures. Along with the rockabilly-tinged "Five Small Words", Costello and his combo of Imposters and Sugarcanes players deliver a grade-A weepy with "That's Not The Part Of Him You're Leaving", a George Jones-worthy ballad that casts love as "*a many-splintered thing*". The music-hall motif from "Jimmie Standing In The Rain" recurs less successfully in the disposable "A Voice In The Dark" and more dramatically in "You Hung The Moon". The latter's initially ominous séance scene unexpectedly shifts into something dreamier, the song culminating in a pillowy, Nelson Riddle-style arrangement for the album's largest contingent of musicians.

It's followed by "Bullets For The New-Born King", *National Ransom*'s sparest song as well as its most beautiful – provided you can ignore the more jarring images contained in the lyrics, which are the lamentations of a regret-filled political assassin holed up somewhere in 1950s Central America. As much as he tries to dull his pain with amber-coloured alcohol and "*the grains absolved in spoons and flames*", he can't rid himself of the uglier memories of acts performed upon "*traitors*", like the man left hanging from a window cord.

The presence of death is just as pronounced in "One Bell Ringing". Singing softly atop an intricate mesh of acoustic guitar, double bass and a judiciously arranged set of horns, Costello imagines the final moments of Jean Charles de Menezes, the 27-year-old Brazilian shot dead by London police after being misidentified as a culprit in the London bombings of July 21, 2005. It's impossible not to feel the chill as Costello imagines his last thoughts of "*honey dripping from a spoon, girls whispering in Portuguese*".

For all of the rambunctious good cheer that *National Ransom* exudes, there's a bleakness at the album's core. You can't help but feel some sympathy for the luckless and loveless people who continue to populate Costello's songs. Wherever and whenever they may happen to be in history, most of them merit the same tagline: "In The Dark. In Pain. As Usual."

TRACKMARKS NATIONAL RANSOM

1. National Ransom ★★★★
2. Jimmie Standing In The Rain ★★★
3. Stations Of The Cross ★★★
4. A Slow Drag With Josephine ★★★
5. Five Small Words ★★★★
6. Church Underground ★★★★★
7. You Hung The Moon ★★★★
8. Bullets For The New-Born King ★★★★
9. I Lost You ★★★
10. Dr Watson, I Presume ★★★★
11. One Bell Ringing ★★★★
12. The Spell That You Cast ★★
13. That's Not The Part Of Him You're Leaving ★★★★
14. My Lovely Jezebel ★★
15. All These Strangers ★★★
16. A Voice In The Dark ★★

Label: Hear Music
Produced by: T Bone Burnett
Recorded at: Sound Emporium and The House, Nashville; Village Recorders, Los Angeles

Personnel include: Elvis Costello (vocals, guitars, bass, organ), Steve Nieve (celeste, organ, piano), Pete Thomas (drums, percussion), Dennis Crouch (double bass), Mike Compton (mandolin, vocals), Jerry Douglas (dobro, lap steel), Jeff Taylor (accordion, piano), Marc Ribot (banjo, guitar), Leon Russell (piano), Vince Gill (vocals), Jim Lauderdale (vocals), Tim Lauderdale (vocals), George Bohanon (baritone horn, trombone)
Highest chart position: UK 71; US 39

WISE UP GHOST

Backstage at *Jimmy Fallon*, Costello and The Roots cook up a potent collaboration. "There's no such thing as too funky!" BY SHARON O'CONNELL

RELEASED SEPTEMBER 17, 2013

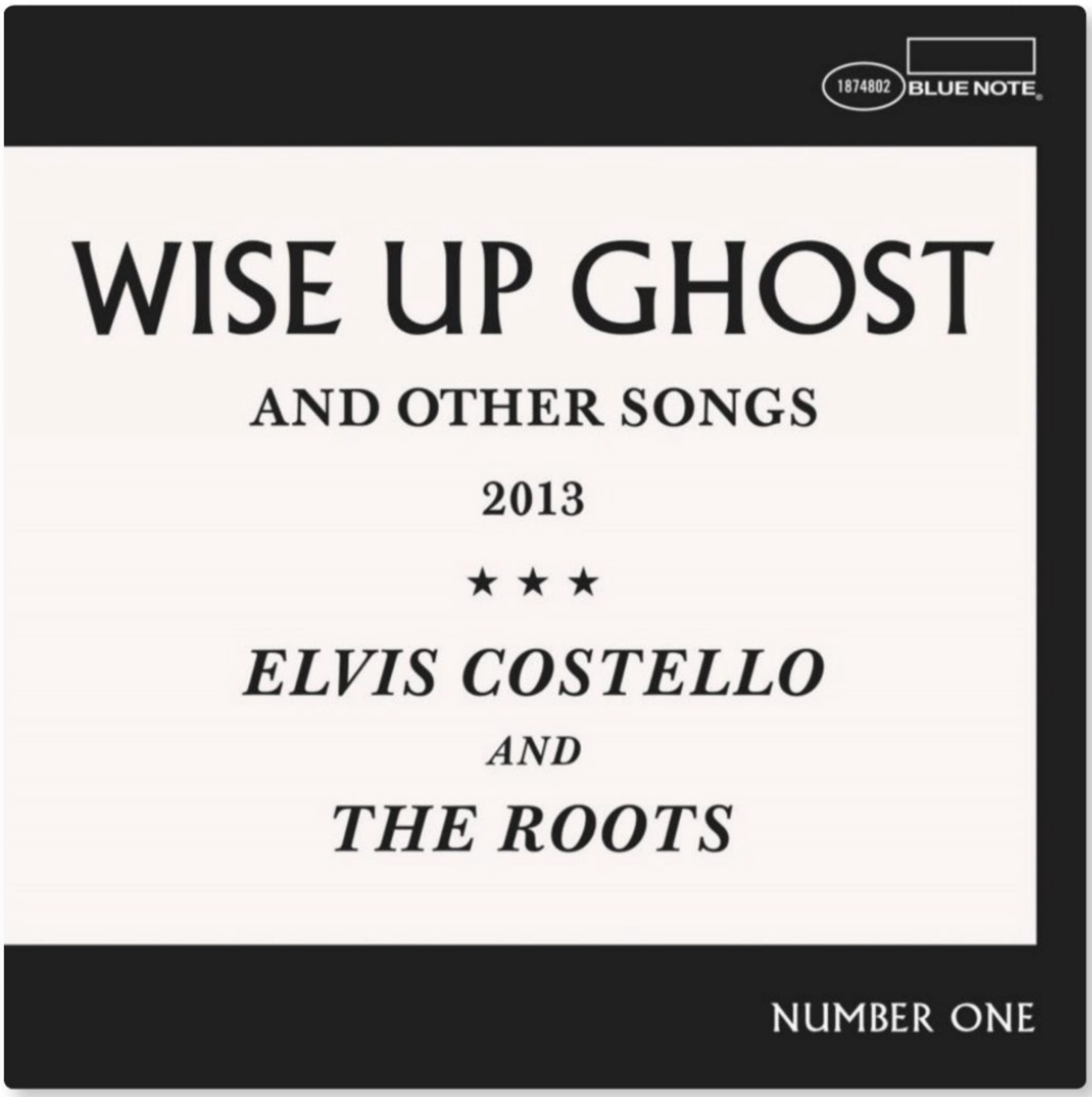
THE STORY OF the hook-up between the English musical polygamist and pre-eminent American alt.hip-hop outfit The Roots is one of random concurrence and surprisingly little planning. In 2009, Elvis Costello was booked to make his first appearance on *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon*, where The Roots were the recently installed house band. As he told *The Guardian* in September of 2013, back then he was "wondering if making records was still a suitable occupation" for a family man and, having no new album to promote, he left the choice of which songs to perform to The Roots. Self-confessed Costello geeks, band leader/drummer Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson and Roots co-producer/engineer Steven Mandel opted for "Watching The Detectives" and an obscure bootleg version of "High Fidelity".

"We thought we were David Bowie doing 'Station To Station' when I wrote it," explained Costello of the latter, but I couldn't carry that off with The Attractions because we didn't have Carlos Alomar or Eno – we just had Nick Lowe, a lot of blue pills and vodka, so we played it really fast. But the bootleg version did have this Chic-influenced funk thing going on – and The Roots went back to that."

"High Fidelity", of course, is a track from *Get Happy!!*, an album rife with references to '60s R'n'B, so Questlove and Mandel's choice isn't hugely surprising, but it did underline the artists' common ground and suggest that some kind of collaboration beyond the guest artist and the backing band was a great idea. However, it was only after they'd played together on ...*Fallon* three times that recording started to take shape, via communal jam sessions and Costello's experiments with snippets from The Roots' vast sonic archive sent to him by Mandel. As Questlove revealed to *Vulture* magazine in September of 2013: "We made this album in our dressing room [*at the TV studio*]. After the show was over, Elvis would come at, like, seven o'clock and we'd just mess around until 2am and go home with these cool songs... After we did 14 of these songs, we were like, 'Are we making a record? Or are we just doing this for fun?' Initially, I thought that maybe I'd just leak a song on the internet for free. Elvis just happened to play it for Don Was – and it went from there."

Costello described the recording of *Wise Up Ghost* in an interview with *NPR* in September of 2013: "The good thing about the way The Roots work day-to-day for the *Fallon* show is, they're not learning the music two seconds before a performance. They're going in and working on the music for the show and their music, in an environment where there's no escape from it. It's like the tech cupboard in most studios that's been converted into a workroom. So I go in there and we're standing shoulder-to-shoulder in the best possible sense and learning this song... The way we did it there was, we just started playing and reacting to what we heard. And if it was good, it stayed on. If it wasn't, it got erased."

It's tempting to read *Wise Up Ghost* as the third part of an American trilogy, following *Secret, Profane & Sugarcane* and *National Ransom*, which were deeply US-focused. But although it accords by tapping the black-music motherlode – vintage funk, R'n'B, soul and doo-wop – almost to the exclusion of anything else, it's far looser and leaner than those LPs, and it sees Costello shifting his gaze back to the wider world and its woes, occasionally reworking lyrics from some of his old songs to suit his politico-personal



THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"*Wise Up Ghost* is a metatextual affair – on one level its sights are set on new frontiers; on another its hugely self-referential, constantly recycling words and musical motifs from Costello's back catalogue."
GRAEME THOMSON, UNCUT, OCTOBER, 2013

purpose. "Refuse To Be Saved" revisits 1991's "Invasion Hit Parade", which was written around the time the Berlin Wall came down and for the singer "seemed oddly appropriate to the present", two decades on. With "Stick Out Your Tongue", he returns to the theme of media intrusion that informed "Pills & Soap" and conflates lyrics from that song with excerpts from 1991's "Hurry Down Doomsday". Costello told *The Guardian*: "Some of the words are more true to life than ever. So to restate them to different music gives you the chance to place the emphasis somewhere else. I'm not saying anything that's unprecedented. I just wanted to give a voice to the dissent again."

There's a 17-year age gap between Costello and Questlove and considerable cultural differences, but at no point does *Wise Up Ghost* sound like a senior white establishment figure trying to prove he has "swag". And what it might lack in adventure, it more than makes up for with jazz-literate, fat-free grooves that tap a history from Fela Kuti, James Brown, Booker T and Quincy Jones to Prince and The Roots themselves, the whole stoked by a slow smouldering heat, and making judicious use of The Brent Fischer Orchestra. From opener "Walk Us Uptown", whose title, energy and simulated car horns are instant signifiers of NYC, to the dreamy, psychedelic hip-hop of "Viceroy's Row", it's the sound of creative dispositions in sync. "Come The Meantimes" – whose cinematic soundbed suggests DJ Shadow channelling Gian Piero Reverberi – and anguished closing ballad "If I Could Believe", too, appear as deliberate variants, rather than tracks that don't really belong but that nobody could bear to dump.

It was never likely to be the deepest recording crush for devotees of either Elvis Costello or The Roots, but *Wise Up Ghost* reflects an unselfish dialogue particular to one place and one time, with swing the shared language. That's something that bothered Questlove before they began. "I really wanted to sort of suppress what I was known for," he told *NPR*. "I didn't want it be that groove heavy. I didn't want this to be a footnote in [*Costello's*] history. I wanted this to be as important a statement as *Trust* was or as *This Year's Model* or any of his records." Costello, though, was unconcerned. As he said to *The Guardian*, "There's no such thing as too funky."

TRACKMARKS WISE UP GHOST

1. Walk Us Uptown ★★★★
2. Sugar Won't Work ★★★
3. Refuse To Be Saved ★★★★
4. Wake Me Up ★★★★★
5. Tripwire ★★★★
6. Stick Out Your Tongue ★★★
7. Come The Meantimes ★★★
8. (She Might Be A) Grenade ★★★★
9. Cinco Minutos Con Vos ★★★
10. Viceroy's Row ★★★★★
11. Wise Up Ghost ★★★★
12. If I Could Believe ★★★

Label: Blue Note
Produced by: Amir "Questlove" Thompson, Elvis Costello, Steven Mandel
Recorded at: The Roots' rehearsal room, NBC Studios, New York
Personnel: Elvis Costello (guitars, vocals, bass, keys, melodica), Amir "Questlove" Thompson (drums), Kirk Douglas (guitars, vocals), Pino Palladino (bass), Mark Kelley (bass), James Poyser (keys), Frank "Knuckles" Walker (percussion), Damon Bryson (sousaphone), Drew Dembowski (bass), Ken Wild (bass), Raymond Angry (keys), Bill Reichenbach Jr (trombone, euphonium, tuba), Marisol Hernandez (lead vocal on "Cinco Minutos Con Vos"), The Brent Fischer Orchestra
Highest chart position: UK 28; US 16

COMPILATIONS AND LIVE ALBUMS

10,000 Bloody Marys… TERRY STAUNTON heroically navigates a course through the bewildering comps, soundtracks and live catalogue of El Costello.

THE EMOTIONAL TOOTHPASTE. Napoleon Dynamite. The Imposter. Howard Coward. Little Hands Of Concrete. Eamonn Singer. As if 'Elvis Costello' wasn't already fanciful enough, Declan MacManus has long been partial to a pseudonym, and several of the above afforded him the opportunity to put out his own "Various Artists" compilation.

Out Of Our Idiot (★★★), released in 1987, was a playful exercise in mopping up B-sides and non-album singles that had amassed over the previous few years, alongside tracks only heard on tribute albums (a thunderous version of Yoko Ono's "Walking On Thin Ice", with Allen Toussaint). Its sleeve aped the gaudy K-Tel and Ronco comps of the '70s, EC's myriad guises highlighted in Day-Glo bubbles – The MacManus Gang! The Costello Show!

Elvis already had form in this area. It's perhaps surprising to learn that in the 37 years since his first single there have only been three "straight" career-spanning best-ofs, but other more esoteric compilations litter his discography.

Ten Bloody Marys & Ten How's Your Fathers (★★★★) got the ball rolling in 1980, a cassette-only 20-tracker (reissued on CD at the end of the decade) that took care of the previous three years' non-album material, completist collectors reeled in by a couple of unreleased off-cuts; a "Black And White World" demo and "Clean Money", ie, an early version of *Get Happy!!*'s "Love For Tender". In the US, where Costello's previous albums had slightly different tracks, a companion volume, **Taking Liberties** (★★★★), was available.

Costello's playfulness came to the fore again in 1989. Having signed to Warners for *Spike*, he secured the rights to his back catalogue of 11 albums and cherry-picked his favourites for the double **Girls Girls Girls** (★★★★) (its title shared by a film starring the other Elvis), wilfully altering the contents of the CD, vinyl and cassette versions, occasionally overlooking big hitters in favour of songs he felt had been underappreciated. Like *...Bloody Marys* and *...Idiot* before it, the collection was issued by Demon, in which he was a major shareholder.

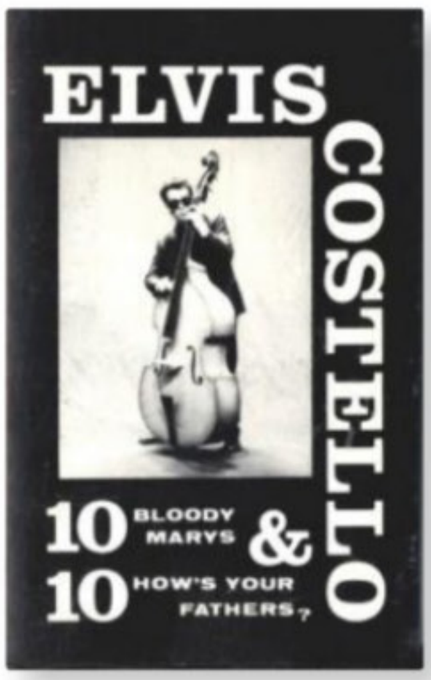
The next off-the-wall comp, 1997's **Extreme Honey** (★★★), showcasing Warners years tracks from *Spike* to *All This Useless Beauty*, came about in less cheery circumstances. Costello's relationship with the US major had turned increasingly sour, and he needed a quickie release to complete his contract before signing to Polygram. His paymasters' parting shot, according to Elvis himself, was to earmark a paltry $1,000 marketing budget for the album.

In the 21st Century, with Polygram subsumed into the global giant Universal, Costello struck another deal. In return for a healthily above average royalty on download sales, Elvis was given the green light to release material on a variety of labels under the Universal umbrella (Lost Highway, Hear Music, Deutsche Grammophon, Blue Note), depending which best represented a particular album. Universal, in turn, were given carte blanche to repackage the back pages any way they saw fit, but have been admirably restrained, thus far.

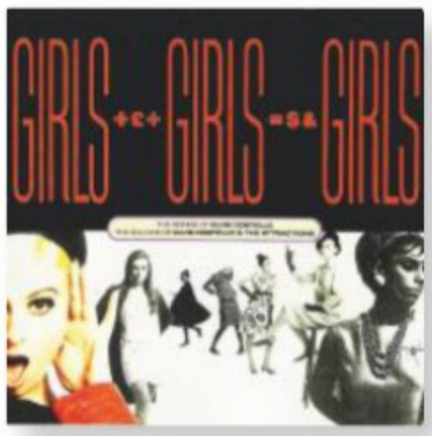
Rock And Roll Music (★★★, 2007) was the first thematic release, its threadbare *raison d'être* being merely a collection of uptempo vintage tracks, but 2010's **In Motion Pictures** (★★★) ran fast and loose with the concept of Costello songs from the movies. Hard-to-find gems like "My Mood Swings" (from *The Big Lebowski*) and "You Stole My Bell" (*The Family Man*) were shoo-ins for the tracklisting, but "Accidents Will Happen" earned its place purely because a character in *ET* could be heard singing it for a matter of seconds.

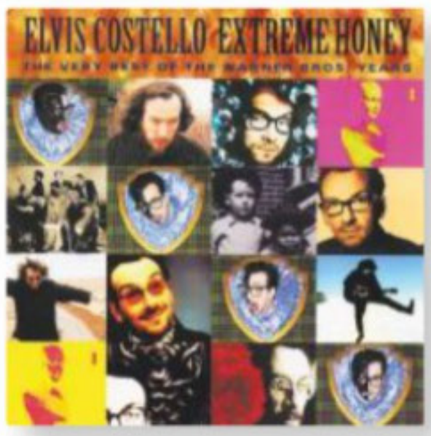
Amid this constant relocating of his recorded history, Elvis has never been shy about

OUT OF OUR 'IDIOT
ELVIS COSTELLO
RARE AND UNRELEASED CUTS
ELVIS COSTELLO
&
THE ATTRACTIONS
THE COSTELLO SHOW
ELVIS COSTELLO & THE ATTRACTIONS
WITH
THE TKO HORNS
THE CONNARD BROTHERS
THE EMOTIONAL TOOTH PASTE
ELVIS COSTELLO & THE CONFEDERATES
NAPOLEON DYNAMITE & THE ROYAL GUARD


ELVIS
COSTELLO
10 BLOODY MARYS
&
10 HOW'S YOUR FATHERS

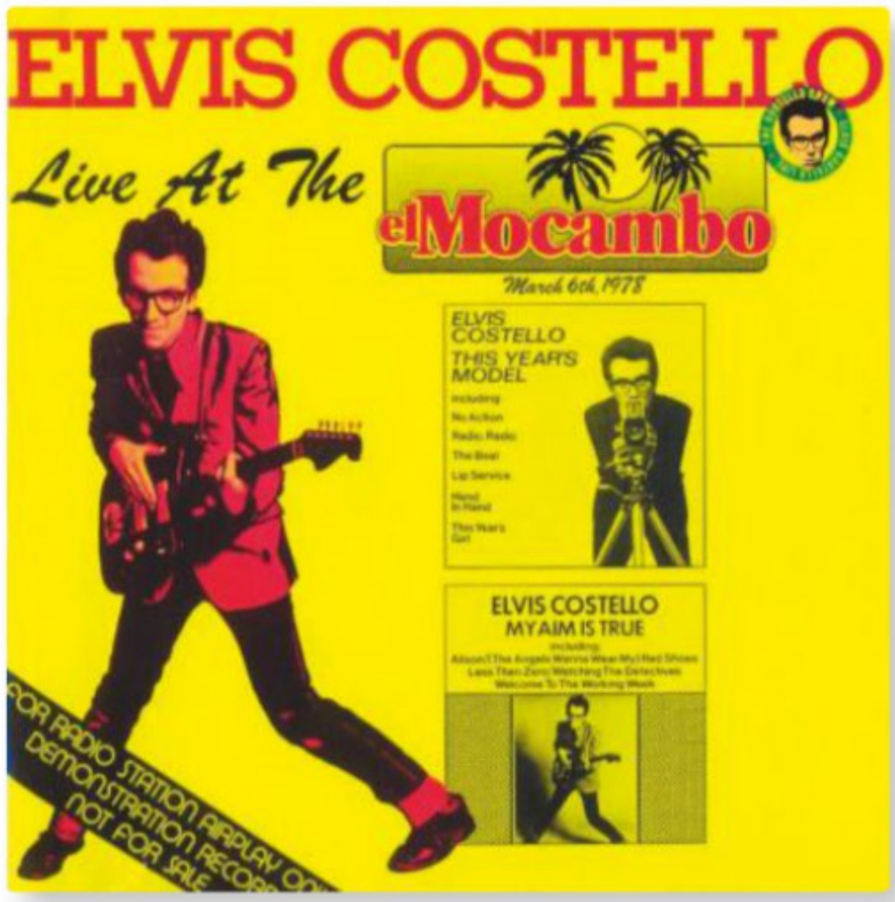
ELVIS
COSTELLO
taking liberties

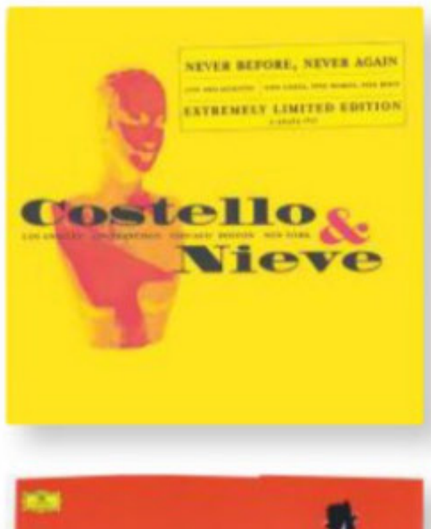

GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS


ELVIS COSTELLO EXTREME HONEY
THE VERY BEST OF THE WARNER BROS. YEARS

ELVIS COSTELLO ROCK AND ROLL MUSIC

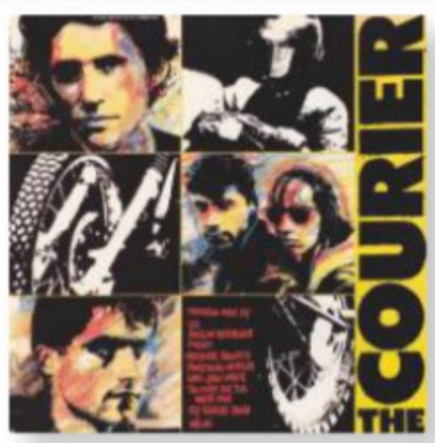
Elvis Costello
IN MOTION PICTURES


ELVIS COSTELLO
Live At The elMocambo
March 6th, 1978
ELVIS COSTELLO
THIS YEARS MODEL
including
No Action
Radio Radio
The Beat
Lip Service
Watch Your Step
This Year's Girl
ELVIS COSTELLO
MY AIM IS TRUE
including
Alison/The Angels Wanna Wear My Red Shoes
Less Than Zero/Watching The Detectives
Welcome To The Working Week
FOR RADIO STATION AIRPLAY ONLY
DEMONSTRATION RECORD
NOT FOR SALE

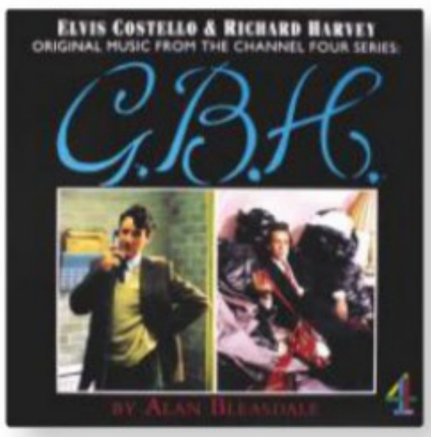

NEVER BEFORE, NEVER AGAIN
EXTREMELY LIMITED EDITION
Costello & Nieve

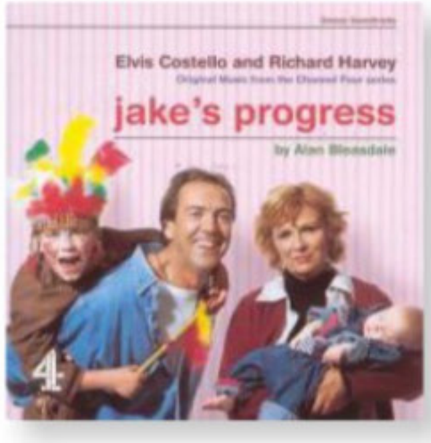
ELVIS COSTELLO
LIVE WITH THE
METROPOLE
ORKEST
MY FLAME BURNS BLUE

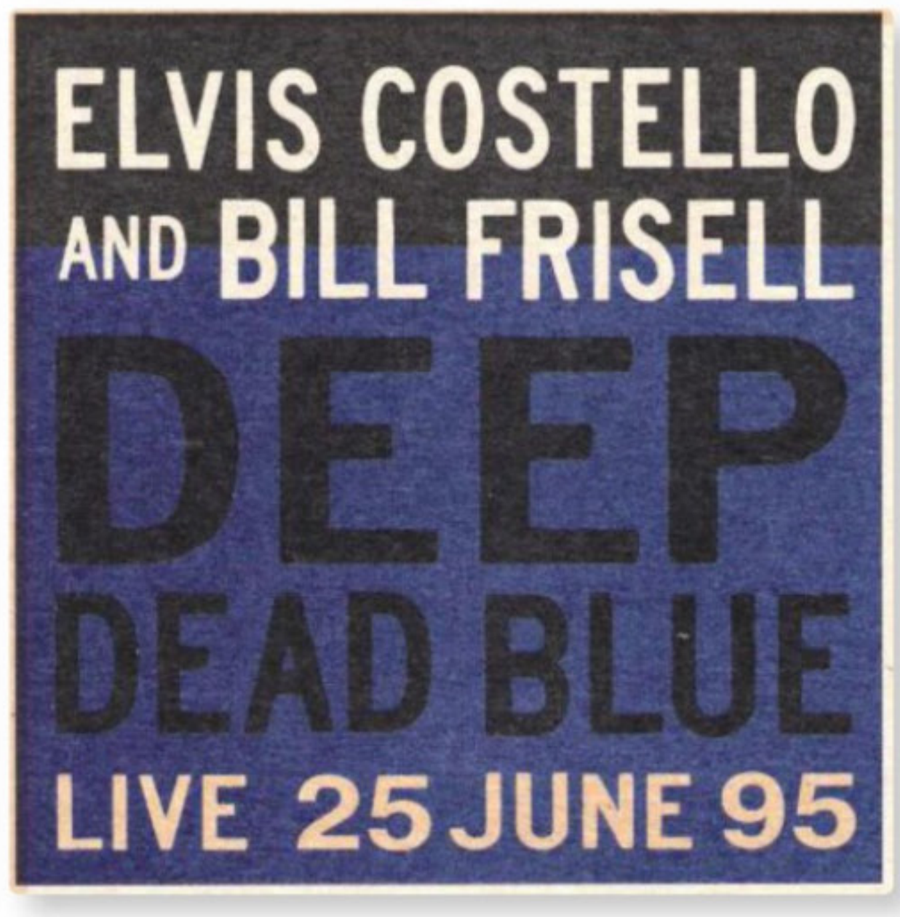
ELVIS COSTELLO
& THE IMPOSTERS
SPECTACULAR SPINNING SONGBOOK!!!


THE COURIER

HOLLYWOOD HIGH
ACHIEVE THE HONORABLE
ELVIS COSTELLO
SOLD OUT
JUNE 4
730PM
AUD
LIVE AT HOLLYWOOD HIGH
ELVIS COSTELLO
ATTRACTIONS
ADDICENTS WILL HAPPEN
ALISON


ELVIS COSTELLO & RICHARD HARVEY
ORIGINAL MUSIC FROM THE CHANNEL FOUR SERIES
G.B.H.
by ALAN BLEASDALE
4


Elvis Costello and Richard Harvey
jake's progress
by Alan Bleasdale
4


ELVIS COSTELLO
AND BILL FRISELL
DEEP
DEAD BLUE
LIVE 25 JUNE 95

The Return Of The Spectacular Spinning Songbook live show at the Royal Oak Music Theatre on June 20, 2011 in Royal Oak, Michigan

reworking the songs themselves, as his live release discography attests. In 2009, Universal gave a belated mainstream release to **Live At The El Mocambo** (★★★★), an electrifying set from the famed Toronto nightclub in 1978 and initially only available as a promo for radio DJs, on which The Attractions lit several fireworks under songs presented in comparatively sedate fashion on *My Aim Is True* ("Miracle Man", "Waiting For The End Of The World").

Live At Hollywood High (★★★★) followed in 2010, and although recorded just three months after the El Mocambo show in '78, the band's set now included a clutch of new songs that wouldn't surface on record until the following year's *Armed Forces*. Pride of place goes to the embryonic piano ballad version of "Accidents Will Happen" and a "Stranger In The House" shorn of its countryesque origins, before the increasingly road-hardened Attractions roar to even greater dynamic heights. A third full US live show from the same year, predating the others, surfaced on the bonus disc of Universal's deluxe reissue of *This Year's Model*, but the gig (from the Warner Theatre in DC) isn't such a weighty landmark.

Returning to a less confusing chronology, **Deep Dead Blue** (★★★) was a collaboration with avant jazz guitarist Bill Frisell recorded during Costello's stint as curator of Meltdown on London's South Bank in 1995. A mini-album of just seven songs, it found the pair dismantling and part-reassembling overlooked Elvis numbers ("Love Field", "Poor Napoleon"), and subscribing to the intended eclecticism of the festival on Charles Mingus' "Weird Nightmare" and "Gigi", from the Lerner & Loewe musical of the same name.

Fast forward a year and Elvis was at it again on the piano-and-voice minimalism **Costello & Nieve** (★★★★), a boxset of five EPs recorded at various stops across America with the long-serving Attraction/Imposter. Heavily reliant on songs from the then current studio LP *All This Useless Beauty*, it also prefaced the upcoming Burt Bacharach collaboration *Painted From Memory* by dusting off "I Just Don't Know What To Do With Myself" (a live staple back in '77), and gave a rare onstage outing to "My Dark Life", the Eno co-write for the soundtrack of the first *X Files* film.

Costello's imprint-hopping arrangement with Universal spawned **My Flame Burns Blue** (★★★★) on Deutsche Grammophon in 2006, which marked his most ambitious collaboration since *The Juliet Letters* with The Brodsky Quartet in the early '90s. Here, he and Nieve perform at the Netherlands' North Sea Jazz Festival with the Amsterdam-based Metropole Orkest, a floating collective of up to as many as 52 musicians that was founded shortly after WWII.

Whereas the Frisell album focused on bare minimums, *My Flame Burns Blue* was gleefully overloaded. The tandem arrangements by Costello and Nieve fleshed out hitherto subdued originals ("Favourite Hour", "Almost Blue"), exploring their hidden jazz dynamics; Mingus was again a touchstone, courtesy of Elvis' new lyrics to "Hora Decubitus", and a similar lick of paint was given to composer/pianist Billy Strayhorn's "Blood Count", refashioned as the album's title track. Having studied musical notation in recent years, Costello's enthusiastic versatility reaped especially rich rewards on two of his best-loved singles. The noir flavours suggested by the words of "Clubland" and "Watching The Detectives" are enhanced by the might of the Metropole Orkest brass with intermittent discordant detours; both songs are possessed of a truly cinematic atmosphere, borrowing liberally from the dramatic film music of, say, Henry Mancini or Elmer Bernstein.

The flipside to such flights of experimental fancy was Elvis at his most unashamedly populist on 2011's **The Return Of The Spectacular Spinning Songbook** (★★★★), revisiting a stage conceit he first unveiled in 1986. Part game show, part fairground attraction, the songbook in question was a giant multi-coloured wheel adorned with the names of about 40 songs; some perennial crowd-pleasers, a few rarely-performed curveballs and a smattering of covers.

Into this gaudy arena stepped EC, adopting his old Napoleon Dynamite moniker, resplendent in top hat and addressing his audience in the manner of a verbose circus barker, while a sequinned female assistant roamed the aisles to invite punters to step forward and spin the wheel. Where it stopped would determine what the band played next. In practice, only about a third of the set was dictated by the wheel, and the numbers that made it onto the LP (cut at an LA show that summer) were, by and large, a succession of greatest hits. The chief variations came courtesy of "Tear Off Your Own Head (It's A Doll Revolution)" with guests The Bangles, for whom the song was originally written, a Stax-infused rendition of Jagger & Richards' "Out Of Time" and the punky pout of Nick Lowe's "Heart Of The City".

It's informative, however, to listen to the album against the trio of live releases recorded in 1978, to compare and contrast the shifts in the musicians' style of playing. The spit and venom of the younger men acted like a set of jumper cables attached to Elvis' twentysomething rage on "No Action" or "You Belong To Me", but a more measured approach is evident on the modern takes of vintage fare like "Lipstick Vogue" and "Radio Radio", peppered with additional eloquent Nieve flourishes.

Always happy to contribute an individual song to a movie or TV show, given Costello's thirst for diversity it's perhaps surprising how few full-blown screen commissions he's taken on. His first attempt was for the 1988 Irish-made thriller **The Courier** (★★★) in which his then wife Cait O'Riordan had a lead acting role. The short(ish) atmospheric music cues comprised only half of an OST LP that boasted cuts by U2 and Hothouse Flowers, and they're mostly unremarkable, orchestrated by in-demand arranger Fiachra Trench before EC had decided to learn the craft for himself. The most elegant was the end credits lament "Last Boat Leaving", to which Elvis would later add lyrics and record on 1989's *Spike*.

Much more substantial were the two suites he composed for major Alan Bleasdale TV works. The Bleasdale connection began in 1984 on the comedy drama *Scully*, Costello providing the theme song ("Turning The Town Red") and landing a supporting acting credit as the title character's simpleton brother. He also appeared as an inept magician in Bleasdale's first cinema offering, 1985's *No Surrender*.

The playwright's most ambitious work since *Boys From The Black Stuff* was 1991's **GBH** (★★★★), starring Robert Lindsay as a corrupt politician, EC tapped to co-write the often lavish incidental music with seasoned screen composer Richard Harvey. Again, lessons learned from a relatively unfamiliar discipline bled into Elvis' own records, the series' title piece motif resurfacing, with unrelated lyrics, as "Couldn't Call It Unexpected No 4" on *Mighty Like A Rose*.

Costello and Harvey collaborated again on Bleasdale's next drama, 1995's less well-received troubled family saga **Jake's Progress** (★★★). Although, like *GBH*, entirely instrumental, cues with titles such as "Grave Dance" and "Unhappy Home Service" bore the hallmarks of Elvis' wordiness, but the textures of the compositions are less bold than what went before.

Other proposed scores for film, TV or the stage have been mooted intermittently, including a late '90s hook-up with Carole King that came to naught, bar one song, "Burnt Sugar Is So Bitter", which briefly featured in Elvis live sets. Next year, however, sees the premiere of his first Broadway musical; *Painted From Memory* will have a story written by Chuck Lorre (creator of TV's *Two And A Half Men* and *The Big Bang Theory*) inspired by the 1998 Costello-Bacharach album of the same name, with the pair reconvening to pen additional numbers.

"I learned a great deal from Burt when I first worked with him," Costello said last year, "but I've still got an awful lot to learn. I've enjoyed writing for film and TV... but Broadway is a very different discipline. Screen music is mostly designed to serve the images, to subtly enhance what the narrative is already telling you, and it's often said that the best film music is the stuff you never notice; it doesn't interrupt the story. For a stage production, the music plays a more integral part, it's supposed to punctuate and move the narrative forward. It's a big ask for a novice like me, but Burt at the wheel gives me the confidence I wouldn't have on my own. Let's hope we get to where we want to go."

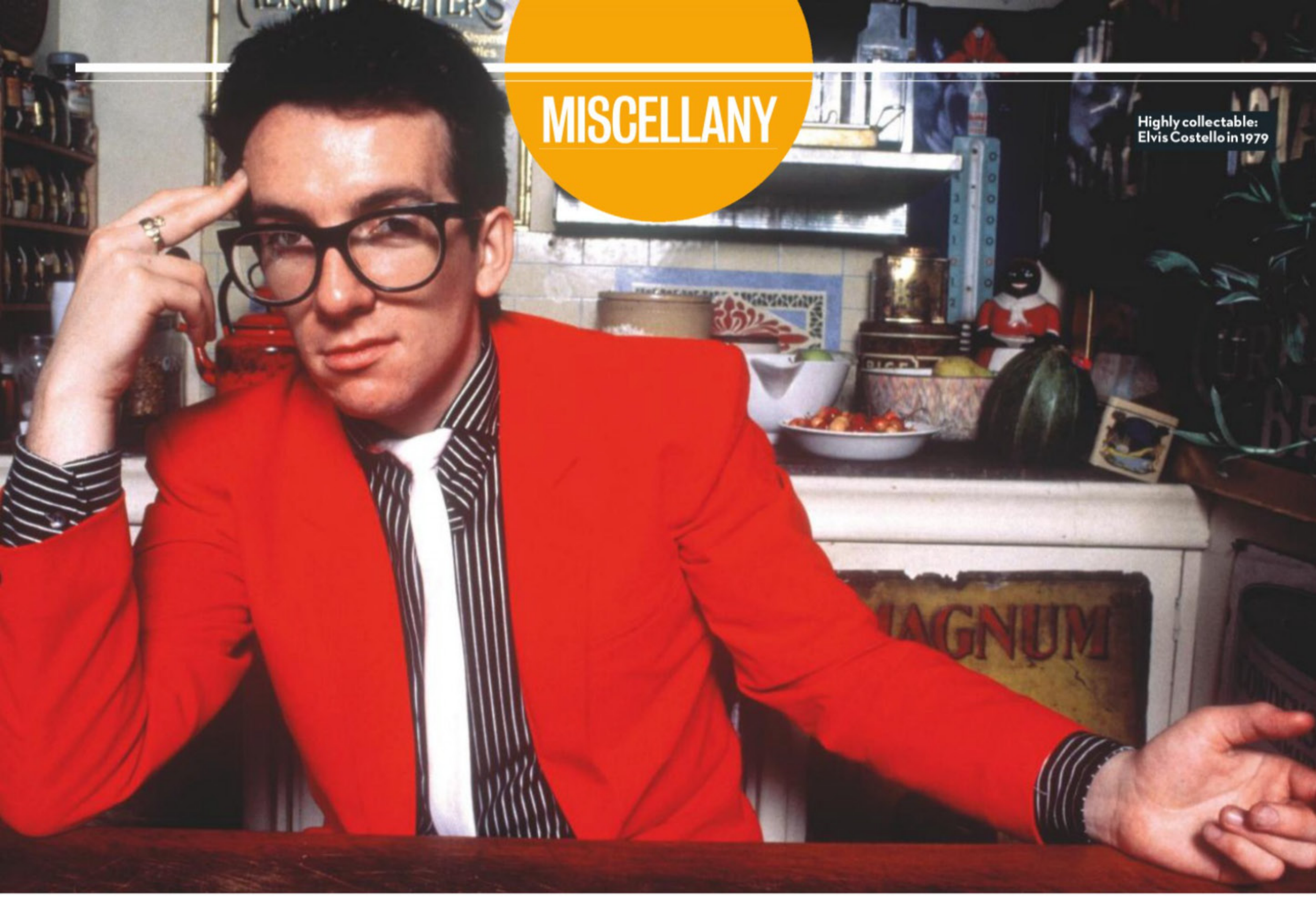
THE CRITICS' VERDICT

"It sounds like a lost and found, slightly dazed, slightly hurried, slighlty hurt, fan-made cassette."
IAN PENMAN ON *TEN BLOODY MARYS...*, NME, APRIL 21, 1984

"Needless to say, it's a variable feast, with thin gruel like 'The Stamping Ground' and other songs that rank alongside his finest ever."
JONATHAN ROMNEY, ON *OUT OF OUR IDIOT*, NME, DECEMBER 5, 1987

"This 18-song collection aims to gather the best of Costello's work of the last decade. There are some sublime moments here, of course..."
CHRIS ROBERTS ON *EXTREME HONEY*, UNCUT, JANUARY 1998

SCOTT LEGATO/GETTY IMAGES



Highly collectable: Elvis Costello in 1979

UK SINGLES DISCOGRAPHY

LESS THAN ZERO/RADIO SWEETHEART
Label: Stiff
Released: March 1977

ALISON/WELCOME TO THE WORKING WEEK
Label: Stiff
Released: May 1977

(THE ANGELS WANNA WEAR MY) RED SHOES/MYSTERY DANCE
Label: Stiff
Released: July 1977

WATCHING THE DETECTIVES/BLAME IT ON CAIN (LIVE)/MYSTERY DANCE (LIVE)
Label: Stiff
Released: October 1977

(I DON'T WANT TO GO TO) CHELSEA/YOU BELONG TO ME
Label: Radar
Released: March 1978

PUMP IT UP/BIG TEARS
Label: Radar
Released: May 1978

RADIO RADIO/TINY STEPS
Label: Radar
Released: October 1978

OLIVER'S ARMY/MY FUNNY VALENTINE
Label: Radar
Released: February 1979

ACCIDENTS WILL HAPPEN/TALKING IN THE DARK/WEDNESDAY WEEK
Label: Radar
Released: May 1979

I CAN'T STAND UP FOR FALLING DOWN/GIRLS TALK
Label: F-Beat
Released: February 1980

HIGH FIDELITY/GETTING MIGHTY CROWDED
Label: F-Beat
Released: April 1980

NEW AMSTERDAM/DR LUTHER'S ASSISTANT
Label: F-Beat
Released: June 1980

CLUBLAND/CLEAN MONEY/HOOVER FACTORY
Label: F-Beat

Released: December 1980

FROM A WHISPER TO A SCREAM/LUXEMBOURG
Label: F-Beat
Released: February 1981

GOOD YEAR FOR THE ROSES/YOUR ANGEL STEPS OUT OF HEAVEN
Label: F-Beat
Released: September 1981

SWEET DREAMS/PSYCHO (LIVE)
Label: F-Beat
Released: December 1981

I'M YOUR TOY (LIVE WITH THE ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA)/CRY CRY CRY/WONDERING
Label: F-Beat
Released: April 1982

YOU LITTLE FOOL/BIG SISTER/THE STAMPING GROUND (CREDITED TO THE EMOTIONAL TOOTHPASTE)
Label: F-Beat
Released: June 1982

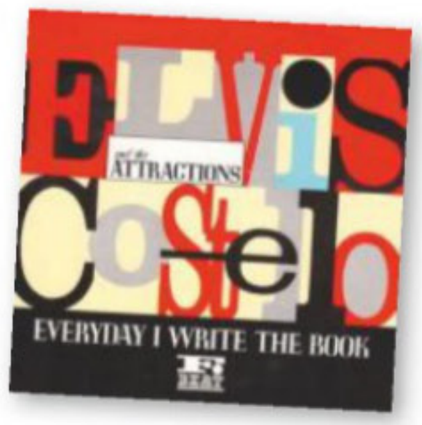
MAN OUT OF TIME/TOWN CRYER (ALTERNATIVE TAKE)
Label: F-Beat
Released: July 1982

FROM HEAD TO TOE/THE WORLD OF BROKEN HEARTS
Label: F-Beat
Released: September 1982

PARTY PARTY/IMPERIAL BEDROOM
Label: A&M
Released: November 1982

ESTATE OF KEITH MORRIS/REDFERNS; WORDS: ROB HUGHES

PILLS AND SOAP (BILLED AS THE IMPOSTER)/PILLS AND SOAP (EXTENDED VERSION)
Label: Imp
Released: May 1983



EVERYDAY I WRITE THE BOOK/HEATHEN TOWN
Label: F-Beat
Released: July 1983

LET THEM ALL TALK (WITH THE TKO HORNS & AFRODIZIAK)/THE FLIRTING KIND
Label: F-Beat
Released: September 1983

PEACE IN OUR TIME (BILLED AS THE IMPOSTER)/WITHERED AND DIED
Label: Imp
Released: April 1984

I WANNA BE LOVED/TURNING THE TOWN RED
Label: F-Beat
Released: June 1984

THE ONLY FLAME IN TOWN/THE COMEDIANS
Label: F-Beat
Released: August 1984

GREEN SHIRT/BEYOND BELIEF
Label: F-Beat
Released: April 1985

THE PEOPLE'S LIMOUSINE/THEY'LL NEVER TAKE HER LOVE FROM ME (WITH T BONE BURNETT, BILLED AS THE COWARD BROTHERS)
Label: Imp
Released: July 1985

DON'T LET ME BE MISUNDERSTOOD/BABY'S GOT A BRAND NEW HAIRDO (BILLED AS THE COSTELLO SHOW)
Label: F-Beat
Released: January 1986

TOKYO STORM WARNING/TOKYO STORM WARNING (PART 2)
Label: Demon
Released: August 1986

I WANT YOU/I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY NOW (ACOUSTIC VERSION)
Label: Demon
Released: November 1986

BLUE CHAIR/AMERICA WITHOUT TEARS ('TWILIGHT' VERSION)
Label: Demon
Released: January 1987

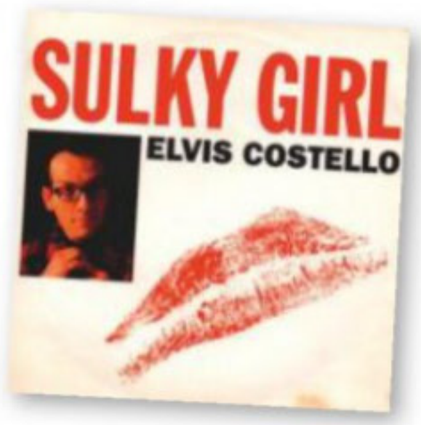
A TOWN CALLED BIG NOTHING/RETURN TO BIG NOTHING (BILLED AS THE MacMANUS GANG)
Label: Demon
Released: May 1987

VERONICA/YOU'RE NO GOOD
Label: Warners
Released: February 1989

BABY PLAYS AROUND/POISONED ROSE
Label: Warners
Released: May 1989

THE OTHER SIDE OF SUMMER/COULDN'T CALL IT UNEXPECTED NO. 4
Label: Warners
Released: April 1991

SO LIKE CANDY/VERONICA (ORIGINAL DEMO)
Label: Warners
Released: October 1991



JACKSONS, MONK AND ROWE/THIS SAD BURLESQUE (WITH THE BRODSKY QUARTET)
Label: Warners
Released: February 1993

SULKY GIRL/A DRUNKEN MAN'S PRAISE OF SOBRIETY
Label: Warners
Released: March 1994

13 STEPS LEAD DOWN/DO YOU KNOW WHAT I'M SAYING?
Label: Warners
Released: April 1994

YOU TRIPPED AT EVERY STEP/YOU'VE GOT TO HIDE YOUR LOVE AWAY
Label: Warners
Released: June 1994

LONDON'S BRILLIANT PARADE/LONDON'S BRILLIANT
Label: Warners
Released: November 1994

IT'S TIME/LIFE SHRINKS/BRILLIANT DISGUISE
Label: Warners
Released: April 1996

LITTLE ATOMS/ALMOST IDEAL EYES/JUST ABOUT GLAD (LIVE AT THE FILLMORE)/WHY CAN'T A MAN STAND ALONE? (LIVE AT THE FILLMORE)
Label: Warners
Released: July 1996

THE OTHER END OF THE TELESCOPE/ALMOST IDEAL EYES/BASEMENT KISS (LIVE IN DUBLIN)/COMPLICATED SHADOWS
Label: Warners
Released: July 1996

DISTORTED ANGEL/ALMOST IDEAL EYES/LITTLE ATOMS (DJ FOOD RINSE)/ATOMS (POLISHED GLASS MIX) LUSH: ALL THIS USELESS BEAUTY
Label: Warners
Released: July 1996

ALL THIS USELESS BEAUTY/ALMOST IDEAL EYES/DISTORTED ANGEL (TRICKY REMIX)/SLEEPER: THE OTHER END OF THE TELESCOPE
Label: Warners
Released: July 1996

TOLEDO/TEARS AT THE BIRTHDAY PARTY (LIVE)/INCH BY INCH/FEVER (LIVE) (WITH BURT BACHARACH)
Label: Mercury
Released: April 1999

SHE/THIS HOUSE IS EMPTY NOW/WHAT'S HER NAME TODAY?
Label: Mercury
Released: July 1999

TEAR OFF YOUR OWN HEAD (IT'S A DOLL REVOLUTION)/WHEN I WAS CRUEL
Label: Mercury
Released: April 2002

45/MY MOOD SWINGS
Label: Mercury
Released: September 2002

MONKEY TO MAN/THE MONKEY/LOVE THAT BURNS
Label: Lost Highway
Released: October 2004

BRILLIANT MISTAKE/TRUE LOVE WAYS (LIVE)
Label: Rhino
Released: April 2005

COMPLICATED SHADOWS/DIRTY ROTTEN SHAME
Label: Hear Music
Released: April 2009

NATIONAL RANSOM
Label: Hear Music
Released: 2010

WALK US UPTOWN (WITH THE ROOTS)
Label: Blue Note
Released: July 2013

RARITIES

COSTELLO'S SHEER profligacy, allied to the fact that he's spent his career recording for the less lucrative labels, means that he's not the most collectable artist. Which doesn't mean there aren't some minor gems worth foraging for. The most desirable is the white vinyl mispress of "Alison"/"Welcome To The Working Week", issued on Stiff in 1977. Pristine copies now shift upwards of £300. Indeed, it's the early stuff that tends to score highest. Expect to shell out £45 on a promo of "Watching The Detectives", backed by live versions of "Blame It On Cain" and "Mystery Dance". And the 12" demo of "Radio Radio", limited to a run of 500, will bring a similar sum. Longtime Elvis-fanciers may also own 1980's "I Can't Stand Up For Falling Down"/"Girls Talk", available only at gigs and released on 2-Tone. The crucial factor is

the omission of 'XX1' from the run-off groove, copies of which go for northwards of £50 ('XX1' versions are worth less than half).

On the album front, the Cadbury's-style cassette of *Blood & Chocolate* (1986) may look tasty, but isn't likely to swell the bank balance by more than a tenner. Though the four-track red vinyl promo sampler, with custom-printed CHOC1 label, is a better bet at £30. Mint copies of '03's *Singles, Vol 2*, a CD box housing replicas of 12 original releases in card picture sleeves, are also worth hanging onto.

As Henry in *Scully*, with Andrew Schofield, 1984

COSTELLO ON CAMERA
ELVIS' FILM AND TV ROLES

COSTELLO'S APPROACH TO celluloid has been fairly casual. He first got the taste for movies on 1979's satirical US comedy ***Americathon***, where he performed two songs as The Earl Of Manchester. His TV debut came five years later, in Alan Bleasdale's Channel 4 sitcom, ***Scully***. Costello plays Henry, the titular hero's nerdy brother, a part which required him to mumble a lot, wear a British Rail cap and constantly fiddle with a train set. The theme song was his own "Turning The Town Red". 1984 also saw him play 'Stone Deaf A&R Man' in "The Bullshitters", a memorable episode of C4's ***The Comic Strip*** that mercilessly spoofed *The Professionals*.

Bleasdale returned to Elvis a year later for ***No Surrender***. A black comedy set amid Liverpool's Irish community, Elvis fetches up at a club as bumbling magician Rosco de Ville. In '87, Alex Cox cast him as a toadying butler in surreal spag western homage ***Straight To Hell***. EC took his place beside Joe Strummer, Dennis Hopper, Grace Jones, Jim Jarmusch and various Pogues.

Costello then steered shy of the camera until 1994, when he appeared in US TV's ***The Larry Sanders Show***. Ostensibly playing a heightened version of himself, he sings "13 Steps Lead Down" before trashing his dressing room in a hissy fit. He cropped up again in Season 5, selling a dodgy motor to Hank, who's left to lament: "I should've learned my lesson when I bought that moped from Sting." There was also a brief cameo as a barman in 1997's execrable ***Spice World***.

Inevitably, most of Costello's film appearances have involved a song or two. He and Burt Bacharach showed up doing "I'll Never Fall In Love Again" in ***Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me***. Elvis reprised the easy listening vibe in 2001, singing "Fly Me To The Moon" for an episode of ***3rd Rock From The Sun***. These brief flirtations with American TV and film clearly appealed. 2002 found cartoon Costello in ***The Simpsons***, unsuccessfully trying to persuade Homer to take up the bass. A year later he turned up on ***Frasier*** as Ben, an aspiring folkie who ruins the bonhomie of the local coffee spot with hopeless versions of "The Wild Rover" and "Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport". There were other fleeting party scenes in Hollywood films. In ***Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby***, he arrives at a bash thrown by Sacha Baron Cohen, accompanied by Mos Def. By 2008, Costello was aboard for an all-star edition of ***30 Rock***. "Kidney Now!" centred around a charity show that also featured Mary J Blige, the Beastie Boys, Steve Earle, Norah Jones and Moby. Last up, in 2010, was an appearance on ***Treme***, in which Elvis is shown attending a Kermit Ruffins gig in the wake of the New Orleans flood.

As Rosco de Ville in *No Surrender*

ITV/REX

ALL THIS USEFUL BOOTY
A GUIDE TO ELVIS REISSUES

GIVEN THE SHEER breadth of demos, outtakes and live recordings over his career, few artists are as reissue-friendly as Costello. Most of the surplus comes from his first decade. Demon's extensive reboot began in 1993, when ***My Aim Is True*** was repackaged with nine add-ons, including 'Honky Tonk Demo' versions of "Mystery Dance" and "Blame It On Cain". Rhino's 2001 update added a further four, before the Hip-O deluxe edition (2007) also made room for a full live show from London's Nashville Rooms in August '77. Similarly, Hip-O's newly-padded ***This Year's Model*** fielded 10 extras and another gig, this time from Washington, DC in Feb '78.

Armed Forces provided plenty of scope, too. 1993's reissue offered some juicy oddities in the form of "My Funny Valentine", "Tiny Steps" and six others, with Rhino's more extensive set (2002) adding another nine. Most of these were live cuts: "Watching The Detectives", "Lipstick Vogue" and so on. The initial reincarnation of ***Get Happy!!*** came with a fair selection of goodies, including "Girls Talk" and "Getting Mighty Crowded". Rhino later added a ton of alternative versions and demos that dwarfed the LP's original 1980 tracklisting. Not everything was quite essential, but Demon's makeover of ***Trust*** did provide a degree of depth with the likes of "Love For Sale" and "Gloomy Sunday".

Costello was on a roll when he went country on 1981's ***Almost Blue***. Aside from live covers of "Honey Hush", "Psycho", and "Cry, Cry, Cry", Demon's reissue also found room for "Darling, You Know I Wouldn't Lie" and "Tears Before Bedtime". Naturally, Rhino opened its doors further in 2004, housing a whopping 27 bonuses, including duets with George Jones and Johnny Cash. They followed suit on ***Imperial Bedroom***, whose 23 extras featured Smokey's "From Head To Toe". ***Punch The Clock***, meanwhile, doubled its original length with a bunch of BBC sessions, demos, live songs and Yoko's "Walking On Thin Ice". Offcuts also abound on ***Goodbye Cruel World***. Like 1984's original, the reissued LP sometimes comes up short, though it's hard to argue with Nick Lowe duet "Baby It's You". And it's fair to say that Demon's '95 edition of ***King Of America*** was definitive enough to render Rhino's later effort moot. Among the add-ons are a couple of Coward Bros songs and excerpts from a live show on Broadway. ***Blood & Chocolate*** doesn't suffer from the addition of Jimmy Cliff duet "Seven Day Weekend", though its real boon is swinging Costello floor-shaker, "Baby's Got A Brand New Hairdo". 2001's reissue of ***Spike*** is highly recommended, mainly on the strength of demos for key tracks "Let Him Dangle" and "Satellite". And it's hard to pick holes in the generous repackage of ***Mighty Like A Rose***, which features home recordings, collaborations and unplugged versions. The expanded ***Brutal Youth***, meanwhile, offers a skeletal framework of the main body via in-progress versions of "Favourite Hour", "This Is Hell" and others. ***Kojak Variety***'s reissue also stayed on theme with a further batch of covers, chief among them The Boss' "Brilliant Disguise" and Tom Waits' "Innocent When You Dream". And ***All This Useless Beauty*** bore Rhino's full weight with 17 extras, among them "My Dark Life" (with Eno). Like the bulk of EC reissues, it's often great, occasionally lightweight, rarely less than thorough.

SELECTED COLLABORATIONS AND GUEST APPEARANCES

NEVER ONE TO turn down a chance to work with friends, admirers or heroes, Costello has always been something of a serial collaborator. His Catholic tastes run from country legends and easy listening icons to string quartets, mezzo-sopranos, jazz pianists and ex-Beatles. Not to mention some handy work in the producer's chair. At the heart of it all, it seems, lies a love of exploration rather than any cynical concession to hip. "The only credibility I care about is the one I get when I look in the mirror," he told *NME* in 1998. "I don't give a flying fuck about what anyone thinks."

With The Brodsky Quartet

GEORGE JONES MY VERY SPECIAL GUESTS (1979)
Duets with his Nashville hero on "Stranger In The House"

THE SPECIALS THE SPECIALS (1979)
His first full production job

SQUEEZE EAST SIDE STORY (1981)
Co-producer, with Roger Bechirian. EC also sings back-up on "Tempted"/"There's No Tomorrow". A year later, he was back for "Black Coffee In Bed", sharing vocals with Paul Young.

ROBERT WYATT "SHIPBUILDING" (SINGLE, 1982)
Co-producer with Clive Langer, who also shares co-authorship with EC and Alan Winstanley

THE SPECIAL AKA "NELSON MANDELA" (SINGLE, 1984)
Producer and backing vocalist

JOHN HIATT WARMING UP TO THE ICE AGE (1985)
Duet on "Living A Little, Laughing A Little"

THE POGUES RUM, SODOMY & THE LASH (1985)
Producer and contributor (acoustic guitar on "Dirty Old Town"; background vocals on "Jesse James")

CHRISTY MOORE VOYAGE (1989)
Backing vocals on "Missing You" and his own "The Deportees Club"

ROGER McGUINN BACK FROM RIO (1990)
Harmonies on the Costello-written "You Bowed Down". His own version later showed up on All This Useless Beauty

THE CHIEFTAINS THE BELLS OF DUBLIN (1991)
Features on "St Stephen's Day Murders", co-written with Paddy Moloney

WENDY JAMES NOW AIN'T THE TIME FOR YOUR TEARS (1993)
The solo debut from the former Transvision Vamp singer was written by Costello, sometimes with the help of his then wife Cait O'Riordan. Original demos later cropped up on Elvis Costello B-sides

PAUL McCARTNEY FLOWERS IN THE DIRT (1989)
Co-author of "My Brave Face," "That Day Is Done", "Back On My Feet", "You Want Her Too" and "Don't Be Careless Love". Costello also sings on the latter pair. Two further co-writes, "Mistress And Maid" and "The Lovers That Never Were", fetched up on McCartney's 1993 album, Off The Ground

BILL FRISELL THE SWEETEST PUNCH: THE NEW SONGS OF ELVIS COSTELLO AND BURT BACHARACH ARRANGED BY BILL FRISELL (1999)
Fresh versions of the tunes from Painted From Memory. Costello sings on "Toledo" and the Cassandra Wilson duet, "I Still Have That Other Girl"

ANNE SOFIE VON OTTER FOR THE STARS (2001)
Producer, guitarist, organist, bassist and guest singer. The Swedish mezzo-soprano also covers various Elvis Costello-penned tunes

MINGUS BIG BAND TONIGHT AT NOON... THREE OR FOUR SHADES OF LOVE (2002)
Vocals on "Invisible Lady", with lyrics by Costello and music by Charles Mingus

WANDA JACKSON HEART TROUBLE (2003)
Duets on Buck Owens' "Crying Time"

LOS LOBOS THE RIDE (2004)
Vocals and piano on "Matter Of Time"

MARIAN McPARTLAND PIANO JAZZ (2005)
Recorded in Manhattan as part of jazz pianist McPartland's Radio Broadcast series. Gary Mazzaroppi plays bass, Costello sings standards, plays guitar and joins his host on piano

TONY BENNETT AN AMERICAN CLASSIC (2006)
Duets on "Are You Havin' Any Fun?"

CHARLIE LOUVIN CHARLIE LOUVIN (2007)
Duets on The Louvin Brothers' "When I Stop Dreaming"

JENNY LEWIS ACID TONGUE (2008)
Shares vocals on "Carpetbaggers"

LUCINDA WILLIAMS LITTLE HONEY (2008)
Duets on "Jailhouse Tears". Costello returned for Williams' 2011 LP Blessed, playing guitar on "Seeing Black"

ROSANNE CASH THE LIST (2009)
Vocals on Harlan Howard's "Heartaches By The Number". He and Cash first sung it together in New York in 2007

THE STROKES "TAKEN FOR A FOOL" (SINGLE, 2011)
Vocals on the live version B-side, cut at Madison Square Garden

VARIOUS ARTISTS LOST ON THE RIVER: THE NEW BASEMENT TAPES (2014)
Features with members of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Dawes, MMJ and Mumford & Sons in T Bone Burnett's music project for unheard Dylan lyrics

ROB HUGHES

With Questlove of The Roots

PAUL MASSEY/REX

MAIN ATTRACTIONS
THE OTHER SIDE OF COSTELLO'S BAND

STEVE NIEVE (KEYS)
When The Attractions split in 1987, the ex-Royal College of Music student found work with The Neville Bros, Kirsty MacColl, Bowie and others, as well as forming The Perils Of Plastic. Nieve rejoined his old boss for two mid '90s LPs, before touring with EC in The Imposters. The keyboardist has also issued six albums under his own name, including 2007's classical opera, *Welcome To The Voice*.

BRUCE THOMAS (BASS)
Thomas had already recorded with Quiver, the Sutherland Bros and Al Stewart before joining Costello in 1977. When The Attractions split, he played with Billy Bragg and Suzanne Vega. His prickly relationship with Elvis wasn't helped by 1990 memoir *The Big Wheel*, which painted his ex-paymaster in a less than flattering light.

PETE THOMAS (DRUMS)
Cited as "one of the best rock drummers" by Tom Waits, Thomas' pre-EC career involved duties with Chilli Willi. Elvis continued to use him after The Attractions first ended, enlisting him for *Spike*, *Mighty...* and *Kojak Variety*. Thomas then became an Imposter, remaining until 2010. His list of credits includes Neil Finn, Los Lobos, The Waterboys, Elliott Smith and Arctic Monkeys.

STOP ME

IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE BEFORE

HUNGOVER SINGALONGS WITH JOHNNY CASH, ANYONE? TERRY STAUNTON LOOKS BACK ON HIS CATALOGUE OF ELVIS ENCOUNTERS. "NOT TOO WORTHY FOR YOU, WAS IT?"

IN A BRIGHTLY lit banqueting suite on the top floor of the Royal Festival Hall on London's South Bank, Elvis Costello is playing the genial host, shaking hands and sharing jokes with all and sundry. It's the summer of 1995, and the opening show of his tenure as curator of the Meltdown Festival has just seen him briefly share a stage with the star turn, the avant collective Jazz Passengers.

I step forward to offer my congratulations, and he gives me a sly grin: "Not too worthy for you, was it?" he asks, remembering the unfortunate word I threw at him during our interview a few weeks earlier. Meltdown is only in its third year, and Costello is the first mainstream "pop" act to be trusted with the reins. Over the next week-and-a-half he will midwife a series of concerts featuring Jeff Buckley, Deborah Harry, June Tabor, previous collaborators The Brodsky Quartet and Marc Ribot, and the London Sinfonia.

Unwittingly, perhaps, he's given his detractors rich ammunition to trot out the old accusations of musical snobbery, but labelling Costello a snob couldn't be further from the truth. For every highbrow suite of love letters written for a string quartet there's an entire album of throwaway ditties for Wendy James; for every layered, nuanced collection of doomed romantic detritus with Burt Bacharach there's a shit-kicking romp through old-school country covers.

Elvis has always seemed more enthused by other people's music than his own; one of our earliest conversations ended up with us spending 25 minutes of the allotted half-hour interview time talking about Roy Orbison, and a month or so before Meltdown, an attempt to grill him about his first Bacharach co-write "God Give Me Strength" – which he'd just debuted onstage – was scuppered by him collaring Presley guitarist James Burton to get the lowdown on a new Jerry Lee Lewis album.

Beyond a handful of rare exceptions where the song in question was inspired by specific events ("Shipbuilding", "Let Him Dangle"), Costello has little interest in dissecting his own craft. "I can't really see the point in poring over a song line by line," he once told me. "If someone wants to do that, it suggests I failed in getting my message across in the first place, that I've only done half a job and there's still a need for me to explain myself."

However, when his own writing filters into the work of others, his excitement is palpable. He wrote "Stranger In The House" early in his career as an attempt to connect with the old-school honky tonk of George Jones and within two years found himself in Nashville duetting on a new version with the man himself. His fondness for creating scenarios suited to other singers is also evident on the likes of "Just A Memory" (Dusty Springfield) and "Pardon Me Madam, My Name Is Eve" (Loretta Lynn), but he thought he'd blown his chance with Johnny Cash.

Terry Staunton has a word in EC's ear: "Sorry about using the 'W' word!"

"If someone wants to pore over my songs line by line, it suggests I failed in getting my message across"

"I sang an old country song, 'We Ought To Be Ashamed', with him at Nick Lowe's house one Christmas, and it wasn't great," he told me during a lengthy chat about The Man In Black. "I was hungover, certainly not on my game, and although John was perfectly polite I got the impression he was wondering who this croaky geezer was. It was a long time before I plucked up the courage to write something specifically for him."

Cash ultimately recorded two Costello tunes, "The Big Light" and "Hidden Shame", but never got round to a third, "Complicated Shadows". Elvis' own version was about to feature on the closing credits of an early episode of *The Sopranos* when we met in 1999, ostensibly to talk about his contribution to the *Notting Hill* film soundtrack, a rendition of the Charles Aznavour ballad, "She".

"It's interesting that both the song I wrote for John and Nick Lowe's song for John ['*The Beast In Me*'] are used in the series, like they're shorthand for the character of Tony Soprano," he said. "I don't know if that was [*series creator*] David Chase's thinking, but it made me look at my song again, because he'd seen something in it that I hadn't been aware of myself."

When we last met in the summer of 2013, Costello had just finished mixing *Wise Up Ghost*, his collaboration with The Roots, adorned with flourishes of hip-hop, but he was also looking at old songs again, dusting off rarely played numbers for his Spectacular Spinning Songbook tour – "a bit of a salvage job," he half-joked.

"Not every song can be a world-beater, not every song is operating on the same impulse or function, but the live stage allows you to locate elements that might have passed you by in the studio. Also, it helps keep me interested in my own work."

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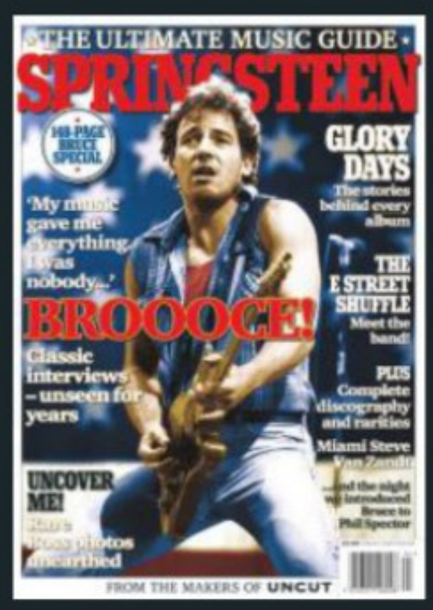

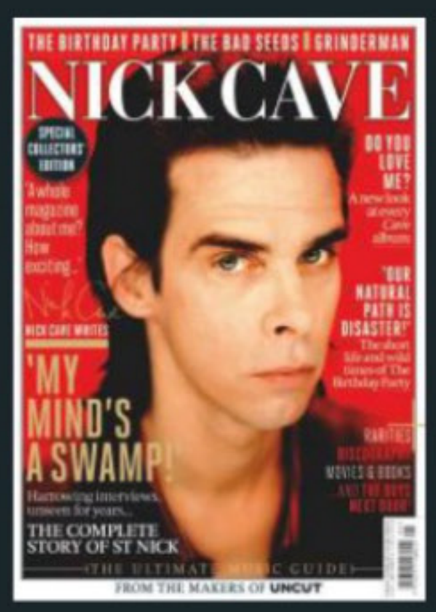

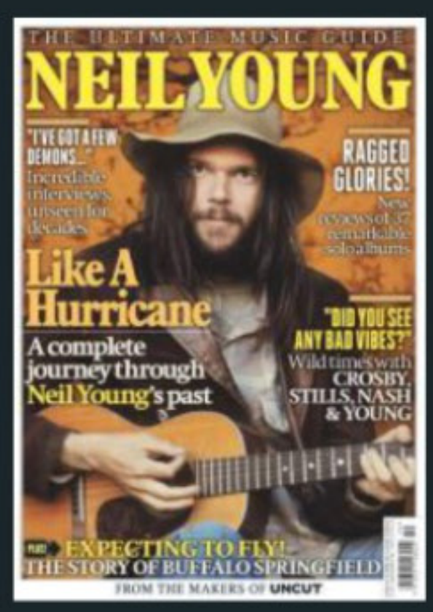

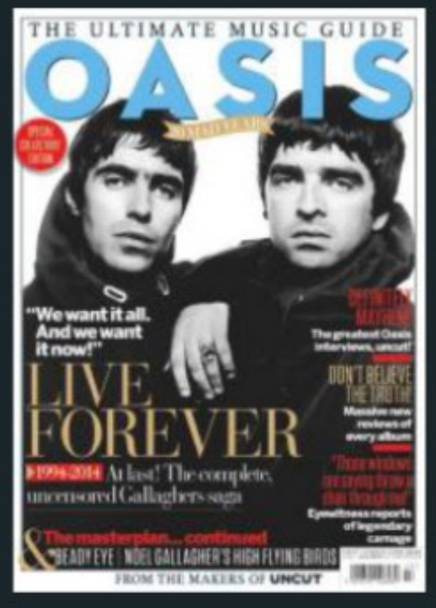

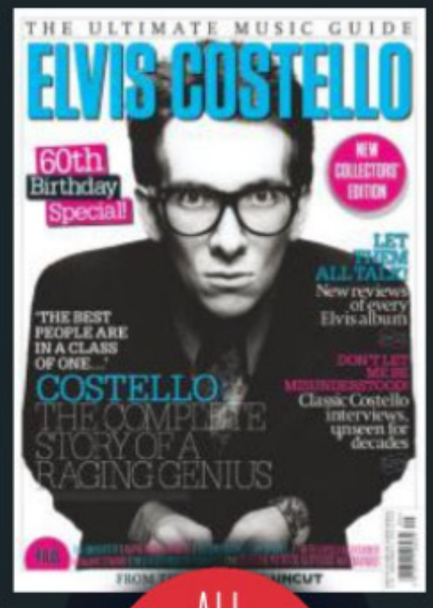

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